

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

YOUEL B. MIRZA



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The
Young Tentmaker

BY YOUEL B. MIRZA

IRAN AND THE IRANIANS
WHEN I WAS A BOY IN PERSIA
MYSELF WHEN YOUNG
CHILDREN OF THE HOUSETOPS
SON OF THE SWORD
THE YOUNG TENTMAKER



The Young Tentmaker

By *Engarmin*
Youel B. Mirza
WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
WILFRED JONES



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C. B. Jones

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This is the story of Omar, the Persian boy, who was born to the trade of tentmaker, but who became the foremost scholar of his age and one of the great poets of all time. It is also the story of Nizam and Hassan, his schoolfellows, whose destinies were to be so curiously intertwined. Although Nizam and Hassan rose to high positions in the kingdom and wrote their deeds into history, they are remembered now because they went to school with Omar Khayyám.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	<i>IN THE STREETS OF NAISHA-PUR</i>	3
II	<i>THE TENTSHOP</i>	23
III	<i>WORLDLY HOPE</i>	40
IV	<i>THE GOLDEN GRAIN</i>	55
V	<i>THE HOUSE OF THE IMAM</i>	71
VI	<i>THE SEED OF WISDOM</i>	80
VII	<i>THE DARK ANGEL</i>	90
VIII	<i>THE POTTER'S HOUSE</i>	101
IX	<i>THE HOLY ROAD TO KERBELA</i>	114
X	<i>THE PROPHET'S PARADISE</i>	131
XI	<i>THE FIELD OF NIGHT</i>	144
XII	<i>KERBA OMAR</i>	155
XIII	<i>THE FIRE OF SPRING</i>	164
XIV	<i>THE MOVING FINGER WRITES</i>	179

The
Young Tentmaker



CHAPTER I

IN THE STREETS OF NAISHAPUR

THE glorious Persian sun had risen from behind the silent mountains, and had scattered before it the mist that had fallen heavily upon the fields and the housetops of Naishapur. Out of respect to the king of the heavens, the golden-throated nightingale, that nested in a tall *chinnar* tree in an old cemetery near the northern gate of the town, had now ceased her lovely melodies, and was flying about in search of food. The wind was blowing softly, vibrating the leafy branches of the *chinnar* tree, and on a tiptop twig the small nest containing several young nightingales waved gently back and forth.

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

The baby nightingales were chirping hungrily. The strongest of the brood, having decided now that it had been cared for long enough by its parents, emerged upon the ridge of the nest, slowly made its way to a small branch and hopped out of sight. The disappearance of the young nightingale created much excitement among the other inhabitants of the nest, and the chirping and screaming was heard by three boys standing under the tree. They looked through the leafy screen and descried the bag-shaped nest swinging against the blue sky.

“A nightingale’s nest,” cried Hassan, estimating with his eye the strength of the limb that bore the nest upon its farthest branch. “I believe we can get it with all the little birds.”

“Let them alone,” said Omar, as Hassan began to remove his sandals to climb the tree.

“Why, by the beard of my grandfather,” exclaimed Hassan, “nightingales bring a good price! We can take the nest and all the young birds to the bazaar and sell them.”

“But we should not disturb them,” argued Omar thoughtfully, “for Khoda has created birds and animals as He has created us. No, no, let the baby nightingales go free, for who knows why Khoda has made them?”

“There is a law, you know, forbidding the taking of nightingales,” prudently said Nizam.

“Ho,” laughed Hassan, “if the law did not close

IN THE STREETS OF NAISHAPUR

its eyes how could the nightingale dealers keep shop? Besides, is not my grandfather the law in Naishapur?"

"But what Omar says is good, and we should not disturb the nest. Even if you are not afraid of the law, it would be a disgrace for the governor's grandson to rob a nightingale's nest."

That argument had weight, for young Hassan was proud of his family's rank. He abandoned for the time his plan of selling the little birds, and the boys walked away to the cemetery, which had housed many important citizens of Naishapur in the past hundreds of years. The three friends found a group of boys sitting on the flat tombstones in the tangled grass. One was reading aloud the record of a departed soul:

"Hamza, the tentmaker, the son of Ali, upon whose soul be peace."

Omar looked at the tombstone. It covered none other than the grave of his grandfather, whose trade had descended to his father and himself. Omar's face lost its genial appearance, and at once his mood changed to deep seriousness. Had not his grandfather once seen the sunrise and the sunset, and watched the moon waxing and waning? Now he was in the earth, his sleep undisturbed by the voices of the boys playing on his tombstone. But the thoughtful mood did not last long, for the excited shouts of the other boys drew Omar's attention to a dog fight,

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

and, as he watched the battle, he forgot that his grandfather had ever lived.

A big yellow dog had stolen a sheep bone from a butcher's stall near the town gate, and was quickly devouring it, with one eye on the boys and the other fixed in the direction of a great lean dog that was also lurking near the butcher's stall, in the hope of making off with a bone. While the yellow dog centered his attention on a tendon that was hard to tear loose, the lean dog edged nearer and made a leap upon him. Then a furious fight ensued for the possession of the bone. Hair began to fly and blood to flow. The yellow dog was thrown flat on a tombstone, but struggled to rise again and began choking his enemy. The lean dog tore himself free, and grabbed an ear of the yellow dog, almost chewing it off. Then, not being satisfied with that, he fiercely grabbed his adversary by the neck, flung him down on the tombstone again, and slit his throat with his sharp teeth.

The boys watched this gleefully, for no boy would disturb a fight between two strange dogs. Soon the yellow dog lay on his back, with twitching legs and muscles, while the victorious brute picked up the bone and walked contentedly to a shady place under a walnut tree. Here he started cracking the bone with his powerful jaws, and eating the marrow.

“He deserves another bone for that fight!” cried one of the boys.

IN THE STREETS OF NAISHAPUR

Hassan added, "I like to see dog or man take what he wants."

"By killing?" observed Omar, who felt sorry for the dying dog.

"Why not?" retorted Hassan. "If the lean dog had merely looked on and wished for the bone he would still have an empty stomach."

"But men are not dogs," said Nizam, looking thoughtfully at the yellow dog, now stiffening in death.

A robin pulled a struggling worm from the moist earth at the foot of a willow tree, but its triumph was short, for a cat, stealthily crawling through the low-hanging willow branches, pounced upon the bird, and silenced its frightened cry with sharp teeth upon its throat.

"Must every creature fight for its life?" mused Omar, as the boys wandered through the cemetery, passing a stray ass that was picking the grass round some one's tomb, and stamping its hoofs on the flat stone.

Beyond the gate of the town lay the wheatfields where the farmers were keeping watch with wooden rattles to scare away the hungry birds from the newly planted grain. They had plowed their fields and had sown the wheat by their own hands in the fertile ground, and now they watched to see that the golden grain was not picked up by crows and black-birds.

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

“Khoda will send the rain in due time,” said one, “and the wheat will begin to take root in the ground and will be protected from the red eyes of the black-birds.”

“*Inshallah* (by the grace of God),” added his neighbor in the next field, “the wheat will be plentiful this season.”

While these good husbandmen were pausing for a moment’s greeting, with their speech and thoughts centered on their treasure buried in the ground, they became aware of the approach of several boys scuffling along the dusty road, whistling and playing. They knew the lean, barefoot boy in the lead, walking with two better dressed companions.

“Oh, young tentmaker,” one of the farmers hailed him, “if you see any black crows in the fields scratching the earth, throw a stone at them.”

“Why?” responded Omar quickly. “Khoda has created the birds, and in the name of Khoda they will find food to eat.”

“But they should not eat our wheat!” cried the indignant farmer. “We have sown the seed and we are praying for it to grow, and Khoda will see to it that we have an abundance of good grain.”

“Khoda has his plans,” said Omar, “and no one can change them. The birds are Khoda’s creatures, too. Let them eat and enjoy themselves.” And he walked on.

“That is a wild chicken,” said one of the men.

IN THE STREETS OF NAISHAPUR

“There is not a boy in Naishapur that can talk as he does.”

Meantime the boys had turned back to the town, seeking further adventure in the busy streets. They sauntered slowly toward the bazaars, passing the high-walled court of the great Juma Masjid, the Friday Mosque, named for the holy day of Mohammed and dedicated to the worship of Khoda, whose prophet Mohammed was. The gateway of the mosque was set with shining tiles that glittered in the sun, and the gate stood open, giving a glimpse of the tree-shaded court and the sparkling pool, in which worshipers bathed hands and feet before entering the house of God.

As the boys paused to look within the court, there emerged from the mosque an imposing and serious figure, dressed in flowing robes, with a high green turban of many folds covering his head. By his appearance, the boys knew he was a holy man and of the lineage of Mohammed, for only the descendants of the Prophet might wear the green turban. They became quiet and obedient in the great presence.

“*Khob, khob* (well, well),” said the holy man, greeting the boys with a kindly twinkle in his eyes, “what has the day brought? Khoda be praised, you have not been in any mischief?”

“No mischief, most learned of men,” answered Nizam respectfully. “We have only been passing

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

the afternoon looking on at what is happening about us."

"And what have you learned?"

This puzzled the boys, but Omar remembered his thoughts in the graveyard, and answered the question bashfully.

"We have learned that life is nothing but struggle. Two dogs were fighting, and one killed the other on account of a bone. The birds are flying about to pick up worms, and we saw a cat catch a bird while it was getting a worm. In the fields the farmers are killing the birds because they eat the grain. Tell us, most holy man, does Khoda will that in order to live we must take the life of other creatures?"

The holy man began stroking his beard in great contemplation. What manner of boy was this who asked such questions?

"Whose son art thou?" he inquired.

"I am Omar, the son of Ibrahim, the tentmaker."

"Can you make tents?"

"I can help my father wrap the thread on the big spool, and I can do some of the weaving myself."

"*Khob, khob*, how many years do you have?"

"My head does not know."

"How many years have you been studying the Koran?"

No one had ever asked Omar that before, and he gravely considered and finally said, "Nine."

"Then you must be thirteen or fourteen. You ask wise questions for your age."

IN THE STREETS OF NAISHAPUR

“If I ask wise questions at my age, then you at your age must be able to answer me,” said Omar, gaining confidence as the bright eyes under the green turban looked kindly into his.

“Yes, yes, I may be able to answer you this and many more questions some day, when we have both passed beyond this life. So you are the young tent-maker, trying to understand the workings of the universe. Who is your teacher?”

“I go to the schoolmaster no more,” said Omar. “My father keeps me busy at the loom now. He has used the last of his yarn and thread and that is why I have this day to play.”

“A boy like you should be in school. The Koran will answer many of your questions. I will come to your father’s tentshop to talk with him about your future.” And the holy man departed on his way, walking in stately fashion.

“Who is this holy man?” asked Hassan, much impressed by the dignity of the retreating figure.

“He is Imam Mowaffak, the chief teacher in the Madrassa,” responded Nizam. “They say he is the most learned man in Iran. My father is his friend, and has sent me here to school in the hope that I may study under him sometime. He does little teaching now, for his is growing old, but it is said that whoever studies under him achieves great success.”

Omar’s eagle eyes became wider than ever. How much would such a man not know?

“I shall study under him!” cried Hassan. “My

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

grandfather's influence is great, and no one can refuse him anything. But this great teacher would not teach you, Omar. Your father is only a tentmaker, and scholars do not come from tentshops. You will be making tents all your life, just as your father and his father's fathers have done before him for generations."

The other boys thought that Hassan was precipitating a fight, but Omar only sorrowfully turned his face from Hassan to look at the distant figure of the teacher as he disappeared from view. The young tentmaker wondered if the great man had been in earnest about visiting the tentshop.

The boys moved slowly onward down the street. They reached the bazaars and wandered aimlessly here and there, for there was much activity to entertain them and many things to see. Suddenly a clear, melodious sound fell upon the confusion of the market place. A voice was heard from the minaret of the Juma Masjid, calling every man to prayer.

"La-Allahi-El Allah, La-Allahi-El Allah! Mohammed rozul Allah! Hayya alal falah, hayya alal falah!" came the sonorous tones of the *azan* giver. "There is only one God, there is only one God. Mohammed is the prophet of God. Come here and be forgiven. Come here and be forgiven!"

A great quietness prevailed everywhere. Even the caravan leaders bowed their heads in response to the call to prayer. A pious man spread his prayer rug

IN THE STREETS OF NAISHAPUR

in the street and knelt down upon it and prayed earnestly. A fruit seller was torn between his devotions and anxiety for his wares when he saw the group of boys approaching. He kept watch out of one eye over his fruits, while pretending to offer supplication to Khoda, but neither his divided attention nor his half-hearted prayers saved him from loss. As the boys passed by his stall, Hassan snatched a long cucumber.

“Thief!” hissed the boy next to him, as they crossed the street.

“You are worse than a thief,” said Nizam, with a frown of disapproval. “You stole the poor man’s goods while he was occupied in his devotion to Khoda.”

Hassan simply shrugged his shoulders. “*Khob*, I am enjoying the cucumber anyway.”

A caravan of a hundred camels was making its way toward the great caravanserai of Shapur. The camels were keeping step with the jingle of the bells that hung from their necks. The *caravan bashie* was perched on a great camel, which carried the largest bell of all and was decorated with tassels of many colors.

“Make way, make way!” shouted the *caravan bashie*, as his camel almost tramped on one of the boys.

“I wonder where these camels come from,” remarked Omar. “How proud they seem, and how

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

important their leader is! When I am a man I would like to go on a journey to see the marvelous things travelers tell of."

"They will make you work if you join a caravan," said Hassan, between bites of the stolen cucumber. "Loading and unloading camels is not an easy task."

The caravan meandered its way through the bazaars, turning this way and that, and by and by met another long caravan making its way to the great Maidan Khana. Naishapur was a center of commerce, and caravans came from Bagdad, Ispahan and Samarkand, and from China and India, to sell and buy merchandise and carry back with them the precious turquoises for which Naishapur was famous.

The boys followed the caravan. The tinkling of the camel bells charmed them and urged them on in the wake of the beasts of the desert. Now they passed the shops containing brass work from Ispahan, shops where shining glazed pots, made by the finest potters of Naishapur, were displayed, and the stalls of the jewelers and money changers, who sold bracelets and necklaces of the finest gold and silver wire, fashioned of the rare metals obtained from the gold fields of Samarkand and the silver mines of Mezanderan.

Now they passed the nightingale shops. The little stalls had cages and cages of Persian singers in captivity, waiting to be sold. The greatest of the nightingale dealers was old Monuf. The cages that

IN THE STREETS OF NAISHAPUR

contained his birds were more beautiful and elaborate than all the others. They were made of finest walnut wood and carved with delicate tools by skillful wood carvers. One cage was an exact miniature of the great palace of King Shapur, for whom Naishapur was named. This wonderful cage held the Sultan, the king of all Monuf's nightingales.

Hassan was curious to learn the price of the nightingales, and stopped to question Monuf.

"O grandson of my gracious patron," said the shrewd old dealer, recognizing Hassan, "the price of this one is five pieces of silver. His song is sweeter than the music of King David's harp. But, since you are the grandson of Hadji Mukhtar, the governor, you may have him for only half what I ask. And this is the great Sultan, the king of all singers. He sings not only at night, but in the daytime as well, and his golden throat is never closed. He can charm hawks and eagles and no bird or beast will ever harm him, once it has heard him sing."

"Now what do you ask for him?" cried Hassan.

"Twenty-five pieces of silver, and Khoda knows I am giving him away."

"*Khob, khob,*" exclaimed Hassan as his eyes fell upon a few little nightingales. Now he became much interested.

"What about these?"

"They are very young," answered the dealer, "and one can not tell which of them might become

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

the Sultan of my shop, but, I assure you, you will not be disappointed in any of them. I have not sold a young nightingale yet that did not turn out to be a fine singer."

"How much do you ask for them?"

"One piece of silver each."

Hassan studied for a moment, then, since Omar and Nizam and the other boys had moved on to view the shop of Ameen, the master wood carver, he left Monuf and his nightingales and walked toward his companions.

The sun was now declining toward the west, and all the boys were tired and thirsty. A welcome song fell on their ears as a man came through the bazaars, carrying a goatskin slung over his shoulder and an earthenware cup hanging from his girdle.

"Water, water, who wants water? Quench your thirst with my fresh water from the river Wadi."

"I wonder how much he will ask for a little drink?" thought Omar. He had no money but one copper penny.

The water carrier came closer, shouting, "Water, water! Quench your thirst with fresh water from the river Wadi."

Omar looked at him wistfully. "How much for a drink?"

"One copper without the cup, and two coppers with the cup."

Omar cupped his hands and the water carrier

IN THE STREETS OF NAISHAPUR

filled them with good water. Hassan approached next. Being the son of a wealthy father, he used the water carrier's cup and paid him two coppers.

"Khoda knows how fine this water tastes," said Omar.

"Have another drink," urged the water carrier, now serving the other boys.

"No, I have no more coppers."

"In the name of Khoda," cried the genial water seller, "here is a cupful! Drink it." And Omar took the cup and emptied it, smacking his lips, but the taste was different.

"Khoda knows," he told Hassan and Nizam, "I have made a discovery."

"What is that?" cried Hassan.

"Water tastes sweeter from your hands than from a clay cup." And they all laughed at him.

But Nizam tried the experiment for himself, by taking a drink from his hands as Omar had done, and behold Omar was right!

"This is a puzzle," observed Nizam. "Will some scholar one day explain this to us?"

There were several women now approaching from the direction of one of the bathhouses. The boys saw them coming.

"Be quiet," said Hassan. "One of these ladies is my mother."

"How can you tell?" asked another boy. "Are they not all dressed alike?"

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

“Yes, but the one with the red slippers is my mother.”

The veiled ladies passed, and the one wearing the red slippers gave a glance toward Hassan.

“Did I not tell you it was my mother?” exclaimed Hassan. “She wishes me to come home.” And Hassan followed the ladies, as an obedient son to whom his mother’s merest gesture was law. But once out of sight, around a turn in the street, he made off quickly in another direction, and hastened to the old *chinnar* tree by the graveyard, congratulating himself upon the chance that had enabled him to slip away from his companions.

All afternoon the idea of stealing the nightingale’s nest had been in his mind. He had to do it stealthily, to avoid disgrace and punishment, for his grandfather would surely mete out a double whipping if word came to his ears that Hassan had been caught robbing a nightingale’s nest.

Soon Hassan was standing under the *chinnar* tree, like a cat looking for its prey. There was no one about, and he pulled himself up into the tree. He climbed and climbed. A few branches broke, and once he almost fell to the ground. But have the nest he must. He finally reached almost the top of the tree. Slowly he got hold of the branch which held the nest. Very carefully he pulled it toward him, until the nest with its chirping little nightingales was

IN THE STREETS OF NAISHAPUR

within his reach. He broke the stem and held the nest in his hand. Eagerly, in his precarious perch, he counted the birds, not being able to wait until he had reached the ground.

“Praise to Khoda,” he cried, “there are five of them! I can have several pieces of silver to spend as I like.”

Painfully he made his way to the ground, clinging to the branches with one hand while holding the nest in the other. Now he was free and the baby nightingales were in his possession. Hastily he hid them in his wide sleeve, half smothering them, and, looking neither right nor left, for fear that some one might recognize him, he made his way through the cemetery and finally through the bazaars until he reached Monuf’s shop. He was relieved to see that few people lingered in the bazaars, for it was near sunset, and soon the drum would beat to signal the closing of the shops for the night.

The little nightingales, from fright, made not the slightest sound, and no one could guess that Hassan had the nest muffled in the folds of his sleeve. But he entered the nightingale dealer’s shop very sheepishly. No one was there but old Monuf, dozing among his captive singers. At once, without any formality, Hassan displayed the five baby birds. Monuf’s eyes twinkled, for nightingales were not easily captured. Business was business, even with the nightingale dealers, and he began bargaining with

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

Hassan. He knew that Hassan's action would be displeasing to his grandfather, if he should find him out.

"Your nightingales are too young," he said, "and they may not live long in captivity. What price do you want for them?"

"In the name of Khoda, I shall ask only half what you ask for your young birds."

"No, no, not for me. Take them to another dealer." And Monuf waved the nest away.

"I am your sacrifice," pleaded Hassan, anxious to have the transaction done with. "I brought these especially to you."

"You should not have taken those little nightingales. It was a very wrong thing for a boy of your position to do. I believe I shall tell your grandfather about it when he passes my shop to-morrow. I have never seen such a rascal as you. Now, what will you take for them?"

"Anything you might offer me, only do not tell my grandfather," begged Hassan, wishing that the nest and all the young nightingales were still in the top of the *chinnar* tree.

"I shall give you one piece of silver for nest and all, and shall keep the business secret from your grandfather," said the dealer.

Hassan fairly threw the nightingales at Monuf, took the silver coin, and disappeared from the shop. He cast a furtive glance about, fearful that one of

IN THE STREETS OF NAISHAPUR

his young friends might see him coming from the nightingale dealer, but he saw no one he knew. The boys had all felt an inner call to supper, and each had gone to his own home.

“Well, young tentmaker,” asked Omar’s father as his son entered the gate at sunset, “where have you been all this day?”

“I have been with Hassan and Nizam.”

“What business do you have with those boys? They are the sons of rich parents.”

“Nizam likes me, and what Hassan thinks of me I do not care.”

“But Hassan’s good will might be valuable. His grandfather can make officials and take their offices away from them on the same day.”

“He may be able to do that, but he can not make tents,” said Omar.

“Yes, thanks to Khoda,” answered his father, “our livelihood does not depend upon him.”

“I also met a great teacher,” added Omar. “Nizam told me he was the wisest man of Iran, and there is nothing he does not know.”

“What was his appearance?”

“He was tall, dressed in long flowing robes and a high green turban, and his eyes were very bright.”

“Ah, I know him by sight. He is the great Imam Mowaffak, and no one can dispute his word, not even the king.”

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

“He talked to me and said that he would come to our tentshop to see us,” announced Omar eagerly.

“By the grace of Khoda!” cried the tentmaker in astonishment, never hoping that such an honored man would condescend to visit his place of business. He looked at his son closely.

“Now, son, as you are a Persian boy, you know there is nothing more important than telling the truth. Did the Imam really speak to you?”

“Khoda knows I am telling the truth. One day he will come to our shop.”

The moon rose over the housetops. The nightingales were singing in the branches, but one of the best singers did not join the melodious chorus. His golden notes were changed to piteous cries as he flew distractedly about the tall *chinnar* tree by the cemetery. He and his mate were now without a home and without a family. They left the *chinnar* tree that night and were heard no more in the neighborhood where the tragedy had occurred.

Naishapur slept peacefully under the moon, but there was one restless sleeper. Hassan tossed about on his soft bed, tormented by secret fear that after all some one had seen him steal the nightingale’s nest, or that old Monuf would not keep his promise of silence. Across the town, in the tentmaker’s house, young Omar was dreaming of the wise man whom he had met that day.



CHAPTER II

THE TENTSHOP

THE dwelling of Ibrahim, the tentmaker, was only a few steps from the north gate of Naishapur. The one-story house was enclosed by a mud wall eight feet high, with a gateway opening into the narrow street. The gate had heavy double doors made of the hard wood of a walnut tree that once had shaded the tentmaker's yard. The doors were hung on iron hinges, and on the right-hand door was a large ring made of iron, which was used as a knocker. On the inside a wooden latch slipped through iron bars and made a secure lock, shutting

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

out the world from the seclusion of the courtyard.

The dwelling housed the family of five, Ibrahim, his wife, two daughters, and the young Omar, and also all the implements that were used in the making of tents. In the summer, the loom was set in the yard, under an old cherry tree, and in winter it was moved back into the house, where a place was prepared for it under the skylight in the center of the one big room.

Ibrahim's business had been good. "Ah, if I did not have to buy so much wool and cotton my worries would come to an end," he said. "I need much black yarn, fine linen thread, and silk for tassels, for this tent must be the best I have ever made."

"For whom is the tent?" asked Omar.

"It is for Hassan's grandfather. He gave me the order two moons ago, and wants it by the first day of summer, when he moves his family to the cool banks of the river. The tent must be big enough to house the whole family comfortably, and fine enough to suit his rank. We must have the best wool and cotton."

"The caravan that entered the northern gate yesterday was loaded with wool," said Omar.

"Yes, I saw it, too, and I am going to the market this morning to see what I can do."

"May I go with you?" cried the young tentmaker.

"Yes, son, you may as well begin early to learn how

THE TENTSHOP

to buy, for buying good material is just as important in making tents as the weaving."

Ibrahim took Tiza, his donkey, from the stable adjoining the house, and Omar placed some hay under the old cherry tree. Then he brought out the woven saddle and placed it on the back of the animal. He tightened the ropes by giving them a hard pull, with his left foot braced against the side of the donkey, as he had seen his father do. Next he brought out the bridle and attempted to put it on, but this interfered with the donkey's feeding, and he shook his head back and forth and sidewise, refusing to let Omar bridle him.

"Son, what are you trying to do?" said Ibrahim, as he saw Omar struggling with the animal.

"I am trying to put the bridle on. It seems the donkey does not want to go to the market place."

Ibrahim approached the donkey, held its neck under his strong left arm, and with his right hand pushed the bit between the donkey's jaws. Now they were ready for their short journey.

"Get on the donkey, if you wish to ride," said Ibrahim.

Omar put his foot through the rope that fastened the saddle to the body of the animal, but, before he could mount, the saddle slipped to one side and he fell to the ground. Ibrahim gave a hearty laugh as he helped Omar to rise from the ground, and told him the story of a man, who, though with good intentions,

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

was never successful in anything he undertook, because he did not take time to see that his work was well done. Ibrahim straightened the saddle, gave the rope several twists, and tried to push his fingers between the ropes and the sides of the donkey, to see that the saddle was firmly placed.

“Now, mount,” said Ibrahim, and Omar was on the donkey’s back without any mishap.

With Ibrahim leading the way, and Omar on the back of the faithful Tiza, the little party slowly made its way to the wool and cotton bazaars. They passed old Monuf’s nightingale shop. Ibrahim took a glance at the caged nightingales and turned away in disgust.

“What a shame, what a shame,” he said, “to imprison the most beloved of all singers in such fashion!”

In the great Maidan Khana, the public square, men were unpacking loads of wool in its natural colors of white, black and brown, with here and there a bag of fluffy, light-brown fleece that was camel’s hair. Ibrahim fastened his donkey to one of the wooden posts of a wool dealer’s stall, and Omar dismounted to follow his father.

“*Khob, khob*, Master Ibrahim, you have come on my eye,” said the wool dealer. “May the boy’s head be blessed. Is he yours?”

“Khoda be praised,” responded Ibrahim, “he is mine.”

THE TENTSHOP

“He is a bright-looking lamb. If you send him to school he may even become a great *hakim*; who knows?”

Omar’s eyes twinkled. Could he hope to be known some day as Hakim Omar of Naishapur, who could discuss with learned men on profound subjects? Truly, he might cherish such an ambition if he might only become the pupil of the great teacher whom he had met coming from the Juma Masjid.

“*Khob*, how goes the tentmaking business?” queried the wool dealer, when they had exchanged the complimentary greetings that led gradually to the business at hand.

“It goes well,” spoke Ibrahim. “No one owes me anything, and I owe no one. I sell for cash and I pay cash when I buy.”

“Ah, you do not believe in giving credit?”

“No, giving credit makes me lose sleep. I would rather sell my tents for less and have the money in my hand than to wait on the promise of a greater price, for sometimes such promises are not kept.”

“Well said,” responded the wool dealer. “Since you are that kind of man, my price to you will be cheaper.”

“How much for this basket of wool?” asked Ibrahim, turning to a large basket heaped high with fine black goat’s hair, which the caravan had brought from the distant mountain valleys of Kashmir.

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

“I ask five pieces of silver, and you may visit other wool dealers and, if they can sell you wool equally as good as mine and cheaper, my feelings will not be hurt if you buy from them. But before you visit other dealers examine my wool. This comes from Kashmir, where they breed the finest goats in the world.”

Omar felt the soft fleece, too, as his father examined the wool, pulling a bit between his fingers to test its resilience.

“I take your word for it, and I shall need three baskets. Here is the money.”

Ibrahim took out his purse and counted the coins. The dealer counted them, too, as a matter of formality. He knew that Ibrahim was a good and honest man, and he did not question the value of the coins that came from the tentmaker’s purse.

Omar helped his father load the donkey with the baskets of wool.

“Khoda keep this boy and make him a learned man,” said the wool dealer, as they prepared to depart. “Mark what I tell you, in all my travels, and I have traveled far and wide, I have not seen a boy that had the thoughtful face of this boy of yours.”

Omar said nothing, only looked bashfully at the ground, pretending that he was not hearing the merchant praising him so highly, but Ibrahim smiled proudly.

“Khoda give you prosperity and peace,” he said

THE TENTSHOP

to the wool dealer. "In the name of Khoda, we may do business again."

Next they visited the cotton dealers, to whom the caravans from the south had brought baskets of white fluff, the first cotton harvest of the season. Soon the donkey had another load to carry, for Ibrahim was well known in the market place as a shrewd buyer who paid cash, and there was never any waste of time bargaining with him. When the baskets of cotton had been tied upon the baskets of wool, the faithful donkey appeared to be carrying a small mountain, but the load was not heavy for all its great bulk, and Tiza plodded patiently along after his master to his own courtyard, with Omar trailing behind.

Ibrahim and Omar unloaded the cotton and the wool, and turned Tiza free to browse about under the cherry tree, where he found a few wisps of hay left from his breakfast. Meanwhile the tentmaker was busy, washing the wool in big tubs and spreading it on the flat housetop to dry in the sunshine. When that was done, he fed the cotton to a wooden roller, separating the seeds from the fluffy fibers. Omar gathered the cotton seeds and gave them to the faithful donkey, who ate them with great relish.

Next morning Amina, Omar's mother brought out the spinning wheel and placed it under the old cherry tree. Then Omar climbed to the housetop and gathered up the wool in a basket and carried it

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

down. The wool was dry now, and Amina began spinning it by hand into yarn, while Omar's sisters, with their hand spindles, busily spun the cotton into strong white thread. Now one spool was finished, now another, and within a few days Amina and the two daughters of the house had done enough spinning to provide material for Ibrahim and Omar to start the operation of the weaving.

Strong cotton threads were stretched over a big frame, about two or three feet wide and six or seven feet long. Now very quickly the shuttle, in the hand of Ibrahim, shot back and forth between the warp threads, while Ibrahim's cheerful song filled the courtyard, in time to the steady thump, thump of his feet on the treadle of the loom. When he had finished the tentmaker's song, the shuttle had gone many times across the loom, and he started his song all over again. Thus the weaving grew, and when Ibrahim was tired and paused to rest, or to attend to other duties, Omar took his place at the loom. From the time he was old enough to work the treadles, he had watched his father attentively, and was now able to weave almost as quickly as Ibrahim, and sing as well the tentmaker's song:

*My tents travel far and wide,
They stand under the clear blue sky;
The rains of heaven can not harm them,
Dust and sand will not penetrate them.*

THE TENTSHOP

*My tents travel to Samarkand and Bokhara,
They house rich merchants and holy dervishes;
Wherever they go, my soul goes with them,
For I weave my thoughts into their warp and woof.*

There followed busy days in the tentmaker's yard, father and son working constantly at the loom, and mother and daughters unceasingly spinning to provide the yarn and thread for the weaving. There was no time for play now. Even on Fridays the weaving was not stopped, for Omar worked at the loom while Ibrahim went to the mosque to worship.

“Khoda be praised,” spoke Ibrahim one day, “our work is progressing well!”

“Has Hassan's grandfather made any payment on the tent?” questioned Omar.

Ibrahim's eyes twinkled. “In the name of Khoda, this is a bright boy. As a tentmaker he will surpass me,” he thought. “Do you fear he will not pay?” he asked Omar.

“If he is the grandfather of Hassan, woe unto his creditors!”

“You have a wise head,” said Ibrahim. “He has already paid me half the price in silver, though he did not wish to do so, and by the time the tent is half finished he must make another payment.”

“But if he does not?” asked Omar.

“Then I keep the tent, and let his father burn

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

in Gehenna.” And Ibrahim turned to the loom again and began sending the shuttle flying back and forth to the cheerful rhythm of the tentmaker’s song.

When the afternoon sun was descending low in the west and the lengthening shadows of the cherry and walnut trees in the tentmaker’s yard had climbed the side of the wall and reached the housetop, the weavers rested from their labor. Ibrahim and his family had sherbet under the cherry tree, and Omar, after one glass of sherbet, had climbed the tree, for he had already seen with delight that some of the cherries were turning red.

While his father and mother were talking over the tentmaking and the quantity of thread yet to be spun, Omar had reached the red cherries and was fondly handling them. He gently squeezed this one and that, and found that some were ripe and some were not. The ripe ones he plucked and eagerly ate, swallowing seeds and all. A few plump and beautiful cherries he placed in his bosom, and gave them to his parents as he came down from the tree.

“What fine cherries!” said Amina as Omar gave her a handful.

“They are too beautiful to eat,” mused Ibrahim, looking at the old cherry tree which had borne good fruit for many years. “Khoda is great and knows what is best.”

“But they will not be so lovely to look upon in a

THE TENTSHOP

few weeks," spoke Omar. "They must be eaten while they are fresh and sweet."

"Yes, son, in time they will wither as everything that grows old." Ibrahim knew that he and his wife were like the sun that was gradually declining toward the western horizon.

"But Khoda kills not," said Amina. "We eat the cherries, that is true, but in each cherry there is a seed, and this seed will bring forth many more cherries in time. Thus Khoda has His plans, which no one can change."

"Yes, yes," meditated Ibrahim. "Khoda plans everything. He tells the birds when to fly and whither to go."

"Does Khoda know what is going to become of everybody and everything?" asked Omar thoughtfully, taking another glass of sherbet.

"Why, surely," answered Ibrahim. "Do we not know what is going to become of this tent and for whom it is made? Do we not know all about it, how much wool and cotton it requires and how many days it takes to make it?"

"It is made for Hassan's grandfather, and I know how much wool and cotton we brought from the market, and you say it will be finished by the full moon."

"Then," pronounced Ibrahim, "if we know all about what we make, Khoda knows also what becomes of what He has made."

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

While Ibrahim was thus discussing the ultimate end of his work, a tap was heard from the iron ring on the wooden courtyard door.

“See who knocks,” said Ibrahim, and Omar walked toward the door and opened it to the visitor. When Amina heard the rattle of the door, she quickly betook herself into the house with her daughters.

As Omar opened the door he saw before him a proud man, dressed like a lord, and beside him was Hassan. They both walked in, and Omar closed the door and followed them. Hassan was striding importantly across the courtyard, scarcely glancing at Omar, as if he had never seen him before. Was he not the grandson of the governor of Naishapur, and who was this Omar? Only the son of a tentmaker. But Omar was not troubled by Hassan’s airs. Had he not stolen a cucumber from a poor fruit dealer, and had it not become known among the boys of the town that the nightingale’s nest in the *chinnar* tree by the cemetery was gone? No one knew anything more, to be sure, but their suspicions were cast toward Hassan.

“If Khoda understands everything, then He knows the heart of Hassan,” thought Omar.

Ibrahim politely advanced to meet the governor. “I am your sacrifice,” he said. “My household is yours. Omar, give the guests some sherbet.”

But the governor was too proud to drink sherbet

THE TENTSHOP

with a tentmaker, and he said, "Do not trouble your boy, tentmaker. I came to see the tent."

"The weaving is nearly finished, and soon I shall begin to sew the strips together," answered Ibrahim. "It is now time, according to our agreement for another payment to be made. Will your excellency step here to the loom and look at the canvas?"

The governor approached the loom, and Hassan stood beside him like an arrogant young lord, conscious of his grandfather's importance. With an ivory stick, Hadji Mukhtar began pointing at the portion of the tent material on the loom.

"The threads are not close enough," he informed Ibrahim. "I fear rain will soak through."

"This is the best work I have done, my lord," said Ibrahim respectfully, yet confidently. "Now let me prove to you that water will not go through it. Omar, bring me the blue bowl full of water." And Omar went to an earthen jar standing by the door of the house, filled the bowl with water and handed it over to his father.

Ibrahim gathered a piece of the tent cloth into the shape of a bag, and poured the water within, and not a drop oozed through. "Now, my lord, you can see for yourself the quality of my work."

"*Khob, khob,*" grunted Hadji Mukhtar, "what about the great winds and hail? Will they not damage it?"

"It depends upon what kind of winds and hail

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

Khoda will send. It will withstand the kind of hail and wind that I have known since my childhood, but beyond that I can not tell."

"*Khob*, it does not meet my eye. It is not worth the silver you ask for it."

"In the name of Khoda, do not belittle your greatness before your own grandson," said Ibrahim. "You are making a poor example to these boys by arguing over a subject not known to you. Making tents is my business, and I know how much material and labor it requires to make one. I am only a tentmaker, but I am a master of my trade, and if you doubt my honesty and ability I will not do business with you. Here is your money, and let me not behold your face any longer. Omar, throw the money at his feet."

"You son of an unrighteous father, know you not in whose presence you are? I can hold you prisoner for life and punish you with the *bastinado* till your feet drop from their joints."

"Just now you are in my yard, and I am stronger than you are," said Ibrahim. "Be not foolish and start something for which you will be sorry. It will not become a man of your standing to be seen walking out of my yard with a broken head."

Omar knew that his father was in the right, and he met Hassan's glare with confidence, for he felt that, though Ibrahim was only a poor tentmaker, yet Khoda was just and on his side. Hassan's grandfather at last decided that he was dealing with a will

THE TENTSHOP

stronger than his own and began softening his words. He bade his grandson gather up the money at his feet. Omar stooped to help him, and while the boys were thus busy, picking up the scattered silver coins, another rap was heard at the gate. Omar, with a glance at his father, ran to the door and opened it. He gasped in astonishment as he beheld the tall and stately teacher whom he had seen sometime ago. He had almost given up hope that he would see him again, particularly at his own gate.

“In the name of Khoda, come in,” said Omar, and very proudly accompanied him to his father.

“May Khoda give you His blessings and peace,” spoke the wise man, seeing that the tentmaker was too overcome by surprise to do more than bow humbly before the unexpected visitor. “I have heard that you are the best tentmaker in Naishapur, and I am always seeking persons who are not to be excelled in their particular work.”

“You are the master and center of knowledge,” spoke Ibrahim. “Khoda has been very good and gracious to me by leading your steps to my gate. My son, Omar, has spoken of you every day for the past moon. Will you permit him to serve you a glass of sherbet?” And the tentmaker made the hospitable offer hesitantly, remembering how the governor had refused.

“In the name of Khoda, that will be refreshing,” said the wise man. “An old man grows tired walking in the warm sun.”

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

Omar brought the glass of claret-colored syrup in which floated plump sweet raisins. He offered it with respectful eagerness, and the great man smiled kindly upon him.

“Yes, yes, I remember this boy and his remarks as I passed a group of boys in my walk from the Juma Masjid. He will be one of the learned men of Iran, and will try to solve the problem of the universe,” he said with a twinkle in his bright brown eyes. “I am always looking for unusual boys, and I am hoping some day to have him for my student.”

Hassan was now feeling very small, and Omar was on the verge of asking the wise man for his interpretation of why water tastes sweeter from one’s hand than when drunk from a clay cup, but Hadji Mukhtar, the governor, who was now all attention before the great man, seized the opportunity to begin an appreciative discourse on the fine work that Ibrahim was doing.

“Now, Master Ibrahim,” he finished, “I am much pleased with your craftsmanship. Here is the payment due.” And he handed over not only the coins Hassan had picked up from the ground but more coins to half their value. “May Khoda increase your wealth and happiness, and I shall expect the tent on the day agreed. Now, wisest of the *magi*,” he said, and turned to the Imam, “do you tarry here long?”

“Nay, the walk was longer than I thought, and the sun is low. I but came to greet the master tent-maker and his son, and if your soul is free let us

THE TENTSHOP

depart." He handed back the glass to Omar and said to Ibrahim, "I am grateful for your hospitality, Master Ibrahim, and I shall seek you again when you have leisure to talk about the future of this young tentmaker. Khoda be with you, and keep the head of your son, Omar." And with a kindly tap on the boy's shoulder he took leave of them, accepting the arm offered by the governor.

Ibrahim and his son looked at each other in bewilderment as the great teacher took his departure in the company of Hassan and his grandfather, and they were left alone in the courtyard.

"Khoda is great, but there is no telling what that rascal, Mukhtar, will tell the great teacher about me. I do not trust officials, and I have a suspicion that the governor will not speak well of us."

"If he is the wise man you say he is, the Imam will not pay heed to a false man," said Omar. "And if he does, then he is not a wise man."

"Ah, well, why fret about what may happen to-morrow? Khoda only knows about to-morrow. Let us weave a little longer before the daylight fails," said Ibrahim, and they went ahead with their work.



CHAPTER III

WORLDLY HOPE

THE tent for Hadji Mukhtar was finished, and the tentmaker and his son were at work upon another. Omar was doing the work of a man, but Ibrahim's keen eyes could see that the young tentmaker's thoughts were far from the loom, and that he had lost the enthusiasm which, as a little boy, he had felt for his father's trade. He sent the shuttle flying swiftly, but the cheerful tentmaker's song was seldom heard from his lips. It was plain that he labored only to perform a duty; his heart was no longer in tent-making. Ibrahim himself often forgot to sing the

WORLDLY HOPE

tentmaker's song, for thinking anxiously about his son and what should be done for his future.

The two labored steadily at the loom in the shady courtyard, beginning the weaving before sunrise and ceasing not until sunset. There was now no pause at noon for food, for the last new moon had ushered in Ramazan, the month of fasting, when no food might be eaten from sunrise to sunset. Because the months of the Mohammedan year began and ended with the new moon, Ramazan came in turn at different seasons, and the fast was doubly hard in the long days of summer, when many hours intervened between the rising and the setting of the sun, and the heat made any toil exhausting on so little sustenance. But Ibrahim, despite the fast, would not cease his tentmaking and pass the days in idleness as some did. He was too thrifty and too proud of his trade, and besides he knew that employment for the hands kept the mind from thoughts of hunger. This year, for the first time, Omar kept the fast, for he would have been ashamed to see his father work alone. He strove to overcome his hunger and weariness and sat faithfully at the loom, but his restless and questioning thoughts made him moody and silent.

Each evening at sunset, when the day's fast ended, the *azan* giver with the most musical voice in the city of Naishapur ascended the minaret of the great Juma Masjid and, with sonorous tones, called the people to repentance and prayer. The fast was

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

strictly observed, not only by the many devout, but by the few indifferent ones who feared the public censure though they respected not the significance of the fast. But all alike waited with longing for the end of the weary month. At last one evening, from the housetop, young Omar caught sight of the little new moon, hung gracefully in the western sky, with the glittering jewel of the evening star at the tip of one slender horn.

“Praise to Khoda!” cried Omar. “Look, the new moon!”

The same glad cry echoed from housetop to housetop all over Naishapur, as other watchers hailed with delight the end of the hard fast. To-morrow there would be no work; the shops would be closed, and all the people would celebrate the end of Rama-
zan with great festivities. Some, indeed, unable to wait for the morrow, descended into their store-houses the moment the new moon was spied, and prepared for the coming holiday with a night of feasting.

As it happened the morrow was a Friday, and at sunrise the same voices that had urged the people to repentance for the last moon were now heard from the minarets of the mosques calling them to begin the happy feast day by praising Khoda.

When Ibrahim heard the voice of the *azan* giver, he thoughtfully looked at his wife.

“Khoda be praised, Khoda be praised!” he said.

WORLDLY HOPE

“This is Juma. Let us go to the mosque and give thanks to Khoda for protecting our heads and filling our stomachs with food.”

Amina looked about for her son. “Omar is now of an age to worship in the mosque,” she said. “The words of the preacher might soothe his restless spirit.”

“Ah,” sighed Ibrahim, “it will be hard to keep him at the tentshop. I do not know whether these new friends he has made are having a good influence on him. We are not rich, you know, and can not give our son what Hassan and Nizam have.”

“I know,” responded Amina, and then she added thoughtfully and proudly, “but when Omar becomes a man he will surpass them both. He may even become *azizi sultan*; who knows?”

“He will never become the king’s favorite by making tents. He must do something great and unusual, otherwise no one will ever hear of him. But Khoda knows there is something unusual about him already. Would the great teacher have visited our tentshop if it were not for Omar? *Khob*, Omar is not here, and the preacher will not wait. If you are ready, let us go.”

Ibrahim was dressed in his best coat, woven of threads like those that went into the body of his tents. He put on his high turban and his slippers made of buffalo hide, and Amina covered up her indoor dress with a *chadar*.

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

“I am ready,” she said, and her husband, according to the custom of Iran, led the way from his courtyard to the street. He kept ahead of his wife a few steps, never looking backward, but he knew she was following him. Now they walked through the crooked street that led to the great mosque. On the way they met other worshipers solemnly walking toward the sanctuary, the men walking first and their women following them faithfully in every step.

The high gates of the Juma Masjid were thrown open, and the great pool of water, paved with marble and edged with the finest glazed tiles that Naishapur could produce, was surrounded with worshipers who were dipping their palms in the crystal blue water and running it over their beards in the name of Khoda. Their womenfolk had entered the mosque through another gate, without any ablution ceremony, and had seated themselves in a section of the great mosque, separated from the men by a curtain. Men and women were now facing the pulpit, ready to hear the preaching of Imam Mowaffak, the Wise. Every one knew that Imam Mowaffak would be the preacher that day, for only on such special occasions did the great man appear.

A little commotion from the men’s section was heard. The worshipers turned to the east and heard the saintly steps in rhythmic and solemn fashion walking over the precious Ispahan carpet that

WORLDLY HOPE

covered the steps of the pulpit. There was a slight cough and moving of lips.

“Khoda is great, Khoda is great, let every one hearken to the words of Khoda!”

Then a book, priceless in its decoration, for it was done by the finest calligrapher of Naishapur and the best miniature painter of Iran, was placed between the arms of the beautifully carved and lacquered Koran stand, over which the great Imam bowed his head to read.

Not a shuffle was heard from the faithful worshipers. The great preacher closed the holy book and spoke earnestly to his hearers.

“The month of Ramazan has passed and our repentance has brought a new day of forgiveness and rejoicing. It is good to be glad and take delight in the good things of the world which Khoda has made. But give yourselves not wholly to vain and idle pleasures with no thought of Khoda and the praise that is due Him. How foolish and selfish we are to forget what is of everlasting value in the petty cares and pleasures of the moment. This life is short, and no one knows when the angel of the dark will appear at his door and demand his soul. Do good where you can to those that are with you, for once you depart hence you will not be able to minister unto them. Think not only of worldly goods, for they perish like snow upon the desert, but believe in the Prophet’s Paradise, for

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

there will be our lasting happiness and there shall we find rest for our souls."

The great preacher descended from the pulpit in the same dignified manner and disappeared as he had come forth. Now one by one the worshipers left their places and departed into the street. A woman gave the signal that the men had departed, and each woman covered herself with her *chadar* and walked with stately steps toward her home.

Ibrahim reached his house, took off his slippers and went about his business of making tents. Soon Amina arrived. She now removed her *chadar*, and Ibrahim looked at her as he would at a glittering diamond. Though they had been married for fifteen harvest seasons, Ibrahim thought she had never looked so beautiful as now. He gave thanks to Khoda for his loving helpmeet, and for the peace and comfort of his household, and went to his weaving with a grateful heart and a contented spirit. It was a holiday and all Naishapur was celebrating, but Ibrahim thought he might weave till noonday. A morning's accomplishment would sweeten the afternoon's pleasure.

All morning Amina busied herself at the oven among her cooking pots, preparing the dishes that Ibrahim and Omar liked best. As Ibrahim stopped his weaving and entered the house for the noonday meal, quick steps were heard in the courtyard.

WORLDLY HOPE

“It is Omar,” said Amina.

“Khoda bless his head,” Ibrahim responded as Omar entered the house. “Did you have a great day, my son? Where have you been and what have you been doing? You are old enough now to be going to the mosque on Fridays. You would have seen the great teacher this morning and heard him speak words of wisdom.”

Omar stopped. He had never thought he was missing an opportunity to hear the Imam, and it made his morning seem more fruitless than ever. He had come home somewhat crestfallen, and now he remained silent, not knowing whether he should speak to his parents of what he was thinking.

“Precious life,” said Amina to the young tent-maker, “why are you not yourself? Do you have black thoughts? Have things not gone well with you this day?”

“Mother, how do you read my thoughts?” cried Omar. “I never had such feelings before. But look at my clothes. See my old hat and shabby coat. I have been watching the other boys to-day, and there was no one so badly dressed as I am.”

Ibrahim heard the words of his son and they pierced his heart as a needle. He looked on the floor and spat upon it twice.

“O Khoda, let not my son be like other boys!” he said to himself. Then he called Omar to him and placed his hands on the boy’s shoulders. “Now, my

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

son," he asked, pretending not to have heard Omar's complaint to his mother, "tell what you have seen this day."

"I have seen the games in the Maidan Khana. Hassan was there on a fine Arabian horse, playing polo with other boys. Nizam was good to me. He let me ride his horse to follow the ball. I took the ball from Hassan twice, but the boys called me beggar because of my old clothes."

"What good do you have from playing polo?" inquired Ibrahim. "*Khob*, after all, why should such a foolish game have been invented, to tire the horses and run them against each other, with the men clubbing their feet and heads with their sticks, and all for what? To gain possession of a ball that is of no use. Nay, nay, perhaps the polo players were not having such a good time as they thought."

Omar looked at his father with searching eyes. Such a question had not entered his head. His father, knowing that he planted a seed of wisdom in his son's mind, approached him in another way.

"Polo, my son, can give exercise to the rich who toil not, but we who labor for our bread have no need of it, and when we seek amusement we can turn to games that develop the mind. Polo can not do that. Let us have a game of chess."

After the meal was over, father and son sat down to a game of chess in the shady courtyard. The chess-board and pieces were one of Ibrahim's few

WORLDLY HOPE

treasures, for they were the work of his friend, Ameen, the skillful wood carver. He arranged his battle line with pride, while Omar set his pieces upon the opposite side. The struggle became absorbing as the game progressed, and Omar had forgotten the polo game after the third move. At last Ibrahim saw that within a few more moves he would trap Omar's king. Ibrahim was a shrewd father. He would not beat his son while any memory of the morning's disappointment might trouble his mind.

"Son," said the tentmaker, "my head is dizzy. Let us finish this game to-morrow. Put the board away and we will walk to the *caravanserai* to see how our neighbors are making merry."

Omar joined his father with a cheerful face, and the two passed through the gate into the street to mingle with the holiday throng. But Omar's worldly desires had given his father much concern. After all, he was like other boys. Every boy must dream dreams, but what distinguished one boy from another was the kind of dreams he was dreaming. Ibrahim had dreamed in his boyhood of equalling his father at the trade of tentmaking. He had accomplished his ambition and was content with his small success, but such was not for Omar. Who knew what dreams were in the boy's head, what future conquests his imagination had already won?

The will to conquer was good, but what and how

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

to conquer was something else, that Ibrahim knew. The new friends, Nizam and Hassan, had showed Omar glimpses of a glittering world. The horizon was wide and the heights that might be climbed were overwhelming. But Ibrahim's eyes of experience could see the faults to which the dazzled eyes of youth would be blind. The tentmaker knew that the possessors of great wealth were often unhappy. Men of vast riches were robbed and killed. They lived in prison in their own homes, fearing every man. And officials and men of authority were subject to dismissal and assassination. Ibrahim had no desire to see his son enter such a life. Better a tentmaker, eating his honestly earned bread, than a governor dwelling in a palace surrounded by spies.

It was another day. The great festivities had made some people happy and some people sad. This day the city of Naishapur woke to great excitement. Quickly the news spread to every quarter that the *dalal bashie* (head of the merchants) had been stabbed in his own house, after a day and night of celebration. Officers and soldiers blocked the street, pushing people back and forth. The moving caravans were halted on the spot, and heavy guards were placed at all the city gates. Merchants did not open their shops, and every one stayed within his own courtyard, for on such occasions the innocent might suffer with the guilty ones. Ibrahim kept his family

WORLDLY HOPE

safely in his own house. Omar was curious to know why the great man was assassinated.

“Khoda knows everything,” said Amina. “Maybe he had oppressed the poor and cheated orphans of their inheritance.”

“Oh, he would rob the mosque if he could! All dishonest men come to some bad end,” responded Ibrahim. “Mark what I tell you, the assassin will not live to benefit from his deed. Khoda is great and His ways are just.”

“How could it benefit a man to kill another?” questioned Omar.

“My son,” answered his father, “you are too young to understand, and too young to have your thoughts shadowed with evil and sorrow. As you grow you will have trouble enough. *Khob*, it is necessary to have grief in order to understand this world.”

“Do grief and knowledge go together?”

“They do, my son. Not only that, but in order to know happiness one must also have sorrow with it.”

“And is that the will of Khoda?” asked Omar.

“Only Khoda knows, my son, and now let us talk no more of it.”

Omar looked at the birds flying about him. A robin was skipping gracefully on the wall of the courtyard, and it flew up into the air as a soldier passed by with a spear on his shoulder. Soon a military cavalcade was swiftly moving toward the Juma Masjid. Ibrahim climbed to the housetop, crawl-

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

ing on his hands and knees, for fear of being hit by a stray arrow. He could see the courtyard of the mosque filled with soldiers.

“Khoda knows,” he thought, “they have found the criminal. He is in the mosque. He has taken refuge in the sanctuary.”

Ibrahim came down from the housetop, and Omar met him as he was descending from the last step of the wooden ladder.

“They have found him,” said Ibrahim.

“Where, where?” cried Omar.

“Why, in the mosque,” replied Ibrahim.

“Are they going to take him out?”

“No, no one can do that if he has found refuge in the inner chamber. Not even the chief *mustahed* can touch him there.”

“Can the king go in and bring him out?” asked Omar.

“No, not even the king can do that. The sanctuary of Khoda is stronger than the king and all the army.”

“*Khob*, what is going to become of the guilty man?”

“He is likely to die from fear and starvation,” said Ibrahim.

It was as Ibrahim had guessed. The assassin was in a safe place and could not be touched. But guards were placed around the wall of the mosque to prevent his escape, and the law bided its time.

WORLDLY HOPE

Omar could not sleep for a long while that night. His active imagination centered round the intolerable position of the man in the sanctuary, safe for the moment from the clutch of justice, but faced with starvation if he remained, or almost certain capture if he left his refuge. What had the man hoped to gain by his crime? Riches? Revenge? Of how little value must they seem now weighed against the terrible price he must pay!

Three days passed, and the Juma Masjid was the center of attention for all Naishapur, and the idlers in the market place were laying wagers as to how much longer the criminal would suffer hunger and thirst before he would give himself up or try to escape. On the third night, as one of the soldiers was pacing back and forth, he heard something drop over the wall. He hastened to the spot and immediately held his prisoner between his strong hands. The assassin, unable to bear the agony of thirst any longer, had crawled from his hiding place under cover of night and started to climb the wall. Despite his weariness, he finally succeeded in reaching the top of the great wall. Here his strength completely left him and he fell on the other side like a heavy load.

The soldier had no difficulty holding his captive. He could easily have run his sword through his body, but it was the reward he was seeking. The governor

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

had decreed that whosoever captured the culprit alive should receive a hundred pieces of silver.

Early in the morning the prisoner was seen hanging by his heels from the gate that was near the tent-shop of Ibrahim, and a crowd of spectators had gathered to see the execution of justice.

“Have you beheld the sight? Have you beheld the sight?” cried one man to another from his housetop.

“What is it? What is it?”

“There is a man hanging from the city gate. Verily he must be the criminal. Let us descend and see for ourselves.”

“He is not dead yet. I saw his hands twitching,” whispered Omar to his father, with a shiver of horror, as the two made their way back through the crowd to their own courtyard.

Ibrahim soberly shook his head. “His worldly hopes and troubles will soon be over,” he said, and turned again to his tentmaking.



CHAPTER IV

THE GOLDEN GRAIN

ONE warm day Nizam appeared at the tentshop, seeking Omar.

“Let us go to the river and visit Hassan,” he said.

Omar hesitated and Nizam approached Ibrahim.

“Master Tentmaker, may Khoda bless your head, will you let Omar go for my sake?”

Ibrahim was glad to give his son a holiday, for Omar had worked faithfully, and the tentmaker liked, too, the courteous speech and ways of the young student from the Madrassa.

“Go with your friend, Omar,” said his father,

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

“and Khoda give you both a pleasant afternoon.”

But Omar still hesitated, and at last said, “Hassan and I are no more friends. He came with his grandfather to humiliate us in our own courtyard.”

“Why do you not forgive him?” urged Nizam. “You know we all have faults. If we do not forgive other people, how can we expect to be forgiven by them?”

“My friend,” responded Omar, “no good will Hassan ever do for you or for me. It is best not to see him again.”

“But since Imam Mowaffak came to your tent-shop, Hassan has changed his heart. I heard him say that even if your father is a tentmaker, the great teacher may take you for his student. He also told me that he would like to be a friend to you. He will ask his grandfather to give you a horse to play polo.”

“I want no presents from him or his grandfather.”

Nizam waited a while and observed the expression of Omar’s face. It was sad and thoughtful.

“We all have faults,” Nizam repeated. “We all make mistakes. It behooves us therefore to forgive each other.”

Then Omar smiled and said, “I have forgiven and forgotten for your sake. If you wish to go to Hassan’s tent, we shall go.”

The two boys left the tentmaker’s yard and walked toward the Wadi River, where the tent of Hassan’s

THE GOLDEN GRAIN

grandfather was pitched. Their way led past the fields of wheat, waving in the breeze and beginning to turn golden in the summer sun. Khoda had sent the rain in due season. The tears of heaven and the warm sunshine had brought out the golden grains from the bosom of the earth. The tall bearded wheat was now proudly looking up to heaven and playfully bending back and forth, as a western wind swept up softly from the Wadi River.

Soon the boys approached the river. Along its brink were the tents of the rich families. Every summer they pitched their tents by the banks of the Wadi, whose fresh waters made the heat more endurable. Among the tents Omar saw several that were the products of his father's tentshop, and he felt at home as he walked among them. Some were several seasons old, but they still held their shape, and would last many summers to come. The new tent of Hadji Mukhtar was conspicuous. It was ornamented with silken tassels and the borders were worked with many colors.

The boys saw Hassan sitting by the river's brink, throwing pebbles into the smoothly running water. Omar and Nizam approached closer, and, when they were within a few paces, Nizam called a greeting. Hassan looked up and smiled in welcome. Omar stood silently gazing into the limpid water as Hassan kept throwing pebbles into the river. Pebble after pebble

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

he dropped, making a disturbance in the peaceful waters for a moment. Each pebble made a small circle, which gradually widened, then finally disappeared, leaving no sign that the water had ever been disturbed.

“This world cares as much for us as the Wadi River heeds these pebbles,” said Omar.

Nizam and Hassan looked at him eagerly. Why was this boy so different from all other boys they had known? Hassan had already begun to forget that Omar was the son of a tentmaker. He anxiously extended his hand, asking forgiveness for himself and his grandfather, for any one in whom Imam Mowaffak was interested it was good policy to befriend.

“My grandfather’s soul will be pleased to see you,” said Hassan, and he led the boys into the outer compartment of the tent. The side toward the east had been raised to let in the breeze, and Hadji Mukhtar, the mighty man of Naishapur, was reclining on soft cushions. He looked at the boys from the corner of his sleepy eye. The hashish had the best of him for the time being, and he was in an indulgent mood. He flung a few silver pieces at the feet of the boys.

“Pick them up, Hassan,” he said languidly, “and go treat your friends.” Saying that, he abandoned himself to dreamy languor, gazing at the Wadi River, that seemed, for such was the effect of the drug

THE GOLDEN GRAIN

upon the vision, to have widened until it covered the whole universe.

The boys left the tent, Hassan jingling the silver coins in his palm. He spent the money recklessly. Food vendors from the town had followed the rich Naishapurians to the river bank, to supply the wants of the summer colony, and there was a little bazaar set up behind the tents. Here meats were being broiled into *shishkabob*, and the boys bought of that. Then they proceeded on their way, purchasing fruits, fine cucumbers and sweets, and finally disappeared into a large pavilion and had sherbet. They came out surfeited with food and drink and lounged indolently upon the river bank. The sun was descending toward the west, and the shadows were becoming longer and longer, gradually extending toward the east. Now the tent dwellers came out from their afternoon rest to have their sherbet in the shade of the great trees.

In a secluded spot, Omar, Nizam and Hassan undressed and splashed the waters of the Wadi into each other's faces. When the sun was an hour from the horizon, Omar dressed to depart homeward. Hassan invited his friends to spend the evening. Nizam accepted, but Omar could not be persuaded, knowing that his father would expect him at *azan* call. Saying "*Khoda fest* (God bless you)," to his friends, he returned to the town, refreshed and happy.

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

Omar walked back past the fields of waving wheat, directing his course toward a grove of young walnut trees. These marked the land of his grandfather, Amina's father, and many a summer day Omar had spent with the old man. As he approached, he caught sight of the stooped figure above the golden heads of grain. Old Zalam was often found in his fields, though he was too feeble now to labor and must leave the tilling of the earth to his sons and grandsons. This afternoon he was walking in his wheatfields, with his hands behind his back, viewing the verdure of his land. Occasionally he picked a stone from his ground and threw it into a little stream that watered his wheat. Then he placed a stone here and there in one of his mud walls, and with his own hands stuffed grass and twigs firmly into the fringe of an aqueduct where the water was oozing out to be wasted. He walked all around the little stream that was giving life and health to his land and to himself. Having carefully inspected his fields and the watercourse, he was just descending to the road from a sandy hill where poppies blossomed in beauty and great variety.

Omar overtook the slowly moving figure, and Zalam turned with a light of welcome in his face for his daughter's child.

“Where have you been, young tentmaker?” he asked.

“To the tents along the river. My friend Nizam, the student, and I visited Hassan in his grandfather's

THE GOLDEN GRAIN

tent. Hadji Mukhtar gave us money to buy *shish-kabob* and fruits and sherbet."

Zalam shook his head doubtfully. His grandson's friendship with the grandson of the lord of Naishapur disturbed his simple soul.

"What times are these," he said, "when the governor's family entertains a tentmaker's son? Hadji Mukhtar is a proud man and a hard man, who has ever made the common folk keep their place. I understand it not, but this I know, beware of going unasked to the doors of the rich and mighty, lest the door be shut in your face."

"It is Hassan who seeks my friendship," responded Omar. "He sent Nizam to me, and for Nizam's sake I went to visit Hassan. You know not Nizam. He also is the son of a rich man, but his heart is just. It is because the Imam of Naishapur noticed me that Hassan wishes to be my friend, but Nizam was my friend from the first time we met."

"None of our family nor of the family of your grandfather, Hamza Khayyám, associated with scholars and rich men's sons," spoke the old man, thoughtfully fingering his prayer beads. "Yet none before you had a head for study or a tongue for argument like yours. *Khob, khob*, let us leave these things and look at the wonders of Khoda. What a day this is!" And the old man raised his eyes to the declining sun.

The sky was clear and deep azure, resembling

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

the bluest bowl in Naishapur. The horizon was far and his weakening sight could see farther away than at any time since a cataract had obstructed the vision of one of his eyes. Life was good. The glorious sun had warmed his blood and the fire of spring was still burning in his veins. He plucked a handful of bright poppies and bound them with one of the long stems.

“Take them to the little Bulbul. They will please her.” And he handed them to Omar.

Omar looked at the fragile petals, as thin and delicately marked as a butterfly’s wing. Their life was short as a butterfly’s, also. Only a day or two they blossomed among the waving wheat, then the lovely petals, crumpled by the wind, dropped to the ground and withered into dust. To pluck the bright flowers from the slender stems would scarcely shorten their brief loveliness.

Together the stooped old man and the straight-limbed boy descended into the vineyard. The vines in the vineyards about Naishapur were particularly healthy that season. Every vine was packed with green clusters that the summer sun would turn into purple and yellow and crimson, full of juice and strength, and old Zalam gave thanks to Khoda for his good fortune.

He lifted one fine cluster in his hand and it was heavy. “What fine *kishmish* this will make when it has been dried in the sun.”

THE GOLDEN GRAIN

He inspected all the vines. Whenever he saw a bug on the leaves, he crushed it under his foot and cursed its grave. Some fine grape leaves he plucked from the vines and placed them carefully in his big handkerchief.

“Take these to your mother,” he said to Omar, “to make *dalma*.” He often sent his daughter fresh grape leaves for *dalma*: rice and ground meat mixed together, rolled in grape leaves and steamed over the charcoal fire.

As the two left the vineyard, they passed by a clump of wild rosebushes, and found them withering. The roses that had bloomed were no more there. That made old Zalam feel sad.

“The rose blooms once and dies forever,” he sighed, and Omar’s heart responded to the old man’s words. There had always been a sympathetic feeling between the thoughtful boy and the grandfather who had taught him nature lore in the fields and vineyards. Only when Omar questioned the workings of nature, or the purpose of Khoda behind them, did they fail to find accord, for old Zalam took in simple faith the sowing and the harvest.

He picked two fresh roses that had bloomed late among the withering leaves, and placed one in his girdle and gave the other to Omar.

“This is for your elder sister. She is budding like a rose.” said Zalam, and, having laden Omar with

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

the mementoes of his fields, he took a sheep path that led through a field of clover and then into the orchard of walnuts and then to his own home. A soft breeze blew down several yellowing walnut leaves that had already seen their usefulness and had become old and ready to be turned into earth. Old Zalam crushed a few leaves as he walked on the grass that covered the walnut orchard. But soon he forgot the dying walnut leaves and the fading rose bushes, and thought of his fine wheatfields and vineyards.

“How good Khoda has been!” he said, turning for a last glimpse of the ripening grain beyond the vineyard. “There will be much wheat. The storehouses of Naishapur will be full and the winter will be pleasant. If Khoda wills, this will be the richest year of my life. The wheat will be ripe within two more summer days, and then we shall gather the golden grain.”

At the edge of the walnut orchard they parted, for it was nearly time for *azan* to be heard from the tower of the mosque, calling the good people of Naishapur to prayer and to the evening meal.

Zalam placed his hand on his grandson’s head a moment, saying, “God bless thy precious life.”

Each went his own way in the glow of the setting sun. Omar passed a few farmers, returning late from their fields, and heard them talking of the coming harvest.

THE GOLDEN GRAIN

“Only two more days, if it pleases Khoda, and we shall cut our wheat.”

“My grandfather and all the farmers are happy to-day,” thought Omar, hurrying toward the tent-shop. “But who knows what Khoda will do to-morrow? Yet why think of to-morrow if to-day is good?” And Omar entered his father’s gate just as the *azan* call came from the minaret of the Juma Masjid. A steaming fragrance greeted the young tentmaker from the outdoor oven, and he forgot his serious thoughts as he proceeded to partake of the *shorba*, that had just been cooked in an earthenware pot made by the potter Sadig of Naishapur.

That evening, clouds were gathering in the west. The waters of the Wadi River were restless and impatient. The wind became stronger and bent the tops of the *chinnar* trees lower and lower. Fingers of silver crashed through the sky, followed by mighty roars of thunder. The wind blew harder and harder. Old trees that had stood many trials crashed to the ground, bringing down with them young trees that were to bear fruit for the first time. There was another crash, and another and another, splitting trees and shaking the very walls of Naishapur. The people, wakened by the violence of the storm, waited in suspense, for they knew not what might happen.

Omar looked out into the courtyard. The old

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

cherry tree had fallen. A flash of lightning showed the yard strewn with leaves and branches. A white ball made its way from the dark sky, almost striking Omar's bare head. Then another came and another. Now they descended in torrents, flying in all directions. Omar closed the door. The heavenly missiles were too deadly. The hail continued for a short while, and stopped. Omar looked out again into the yard. Everything was now still, but the ground was white as though a heavy winter snow had fallen.

“Very bad, very bad,” said Ibrahim, as he also viewed the courtyard covered with balls of ice. “This will ruin the wheat harvest and the vineyards.” Then he put out the oil lamp, and he and his family went to bed again, but could not sleep for a long time, even though a cool breath followed the hail-storm.

Early in the morning, Omar walked out of his courtyard toward the fields. In the orchards the ground was covered with the branches and leaves and young green fruit of the pear and peach trees. “There must have been a terrible wind,” said Omar to himself as he splashed through cold water in a little ditch that had been full of balls of ice. The farmers were viewing the damage with heavy hearts. They had dressed hurriedly, while the sun was yet behind the hills, and, without taking any food, had

THE GOLDEN GRAIN

hastened to their wheatfields and vineyards. Now they were sadly returning to their homes, cursing hail-storms and winds and other heavenly calamities.

Omar found his grandfather gloomily walking through his vineyard. The fine green leaves which he had seen the day before were beaten to the ground and covered with mud. The young grape clusters were no longer attached to the vines, but were scattered here and there. The vines were now lean and ugly, unprotected by their thick coats of fine green leaves. They would probably dry up in the heat of the summer sun.

“What a heavenly wrath, what a heavenly wrath!” cried old Zalam, as he left the desolate vineyard and viewed his wheatfields. “We have labored all spring and summer, and now what are we to reap?”

Omar looked at the wheat. Only a few hours ago it had stood tall and straight, lifting its heavy heads of golden grain proudly to the sun. Now it was crushed into the earth and the golden heads were buried in the mud. Zalam picked up a few heads and brushed the mud from the golden grains.

“It is no use viewing the fields any longer,” he said, his heart splitting with sorrow. He took a deep sigh. “*Khob, khob,*” he said then, “what Khoda wills, He wills.”

“Why should He will this destruction?” questioned Omar. “He made the wheat to grow, why should He destroy it before it has filled its use?”

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

“Nay, it is not for us to question the ways of Khoda,” answered the old man. “We must take what Khoda sends, the good and the bad.” Then he thought of the effect this storm would have. “There will be a shortage of wheat. Surely there will be famine in Naishapur this winter.”

The old man turned his feeble steps toward home, with great foreboding, but Omar walked onward. He had never seen famine, and he soon forgot his grandfather’s words. He was a tentmaker, so what concerned him was how his father’s tents had stood such a heavenly ordeal.

The camping ground of the rich Naishapurians was in great disorder. Some of the tents had fallen to the ground from the impact of the great wind, and the balls of ice had penetrated others, leaving holes as large as Omar’s fist. He walked toward Hassan’s tent. It was still holding its position on the ground, and was as sound as when first made.

“What a night, what a night!” said Hassan as he greeted his friend Omar. “We thought stones were coming upon our heads when the hail fell. Khoda be my witness, it was a terrible night!”

Omar saw other tents that were made in his father’s tentshop, and all were undamaged. This would be good news to Ibrahim, and he returned to his father’s tentshop to tell him how their tents had withstood the great hail-storm.

Ibrahim stroked his long beard, which was now

THE GOLDEN GRAIN

turning gray. "Our business will be doubled," he said solemnly, and went to his loom, bidding Omar to sit beside him and do some weaving.

For a few days after the devastating storm, the sun shone brightly over the fields and orchards of Naishapur. The great heat steamed and baked the wheat into the ground. Soon the stalks of golden grain became brittle and ready for harvest. The farmers took their sickles and, each in his own field, started working, gathering the priceless golden-headed wheat from the ground and saving all that was fit to use, as well as cutting the straw to be fed to their animals in the winter. It would be a hard winter, every one knew that. Wheat would be scarce, and those that had never before gleaned in the fields went out with their baskets, scattering in many directions to gather what they could find.

"Son," said Ibrahim to Omar one morning, "we will need wheat. It will be best for us to do what our neighbors are doing. Let us go into the fields and pick the ground. We can make tents all winter. Just now making tents is not as important as gathering wheat, for people can live without tents, but no one can live without wheat." And they departed into the fields with their baskets.

The gleaners picked the fields clean. Omar and his father brought home baskets upon baskets of wheat, trampled and mud-covered heads that had been left by the harvesters. Carefully they tried to clean the

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

mud from the grains, but many heads they found crushed and empty.

“Has Khoda done this to all the fields of Iran?” asked Omar as they were flaying the wheat in their courtyard.

“It may be that other fields have not been disturbed, and the wheat may be as plentiful elsewhere as drops of rain in the springtime. Caravans will arrive soon, and then we shall hear the news.”

The pile of straw was now as tall as Omar himself, but the good heads of wheat measured only a few basketfuls. Ibrahim placed the heads in a coarse sieve, shaking it back and forth until the golden grains fell on the ground and were eagerly picked up and placed in a big jar to be used for the winter. Then Omar and his father went ahead with their business of tentmaking.



CHAPTER V

THE HOUSE OF THE IMAM

THE leaves of the *chinnar* trees were falling one by one, scattered by a swift wind that blew from the north. Soon the ground was thickly covered with beautifully colored leaves that once had been green upon the treetops. The courtyard of the Juma Masjid was carpeted with the gold of poplar leaves. The Imam, coming out of the great mosque, looked at the bare branches that stood straight and slender against the blue autumn sky.

“The winter will soon be here, with the cold winds and snow,” he said, and shivered at the thought.

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

He went out from the gate and bent his steps in the direction of Master Ibrahim's tentshop. Ibrahim was at work at his loom in the courtyard when a knock came at the gate. He opened the heavy wooden door and beheld the stately form of the Imam.

"You come on my eye," he said, and bowed before the great man.

"Peace be with thee," answered the Imam. "Where is your boy, Omar?"

"Like other boys, he is in the fields gathering nightingales' nests."

The Imam gave a wise smile. Many years ago he had enjoyed such sport.

"I want Omar for my student. I have chosen two other boys to study in my house. I want Omar to study with them. You will have no expense, for he will be a member of my household and in my care."

When Ibrahim heard from the lips of the Imam that his own son would be one of the chosen few, his heart swelled up within him.

"My boy is yours!" he cried. "Khoda has given me a real son upon whom I shall lean in my old age." And after the Imam had gone, he sat idle at his loom, forgetting to throw the shuttle as he meditated upon his great good fortune.

Omar joined a crowd of boys to gather nightingale's nests. In the tops of the *chinnar* trees the

THE HOUSE OF THE IMAM

nests were now seen, but there were no nightingales in them, for they had flown to warmer climates to escape the coming winter. The boys threw stones and whirled sticks at the cottony sacks, and many nests were successfully brought down in that manner. The golden-throated singers would have no use for their old nests the next season, for nightingales must have a new home every spring.

Ravenous, the boys returned to their homes for food, as they had romped the fields all morning long in the sparkling autumn air. Omar walked into the tentshop with several empty nightingale's nests. He gave the finest one to little Bulbul, who was the namesake of the sweet singers.

"Here is a good place for that big nest," said Omar's mother, and Omar hung it over a niche in the wall where his mother kept the Ispahani copper pitcher. Ibrahim picked two nests and hung them over each side of his loom.

"By thy precious life," he cried to his son, "the great teacher has been here, and he has chosen you with two other boys to be his student!"

"And who are the other two?" spoke Omar. "Nizam must be one, and who is the other?"

"Hassan, the grandson of Hadji Mukhtar," said Ibrahim. "You are to live in the Imam's house and breathe the atmosphere of wisdom. May Khoda make you a wise man."

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

“Khoda knows,” cried Omar, “I will make you proud of me!”

He had dreamed of one day sitting at the feet of the great teacher, but had hardly hoped that such a thing would come to pass. He went to work at the loom with a contented soul, to accomplish as much as he could, now that his days of tentmaking were few.

A heavy frost had descended upon the vineyards of Naishapur. The vine leaves which the hail had spared now fell upon the earth of their own accord. Omar walked out with his father to old Zalam’s vineyard, where new vines had just been planted. Omar’s uncle was covering them in the ground for protection against the biting cold which was to fall in the winter months. The tentmaker and his son took spades and helped cover the young branches. Every spade of earth that Omar threw down on the vines was thrown in the name of Khoda, a habit learned as he listened to his father, for Ibrahim was a pious man. At one end of the vineyard lay bundles of vines that had been pruned in the spring. Some of these Omar and his father carried home.

“There will be plenty of fuel,” said Ibrahim to his son, “but this winter will be the worst we have seen. There will be a shortage of wheat, and those that husbanded the golden grain will live and those that did not will suffer even unto death.”

THE HOUSE OF THE IMAM

“Father, do we have enough grain?”

“Yes, son, we have enough to keep from starvation, but when there is famine in the land one can not keep the life-giving food all to one’s self. When people are hungry they will come into your very home and take the food away from you.”

“I can not blame them for that,” spoke Omar. “I might do the same thing.”

“A hungry mouth is hard to control,” said Ibrahim.

Then a silence overtook them both. The tent-maker had a foreboding that calamity would befall Naishapur. The father and son trailed along with the great loads of dried grape vines, and with some difficulty managed to pull through the courtyard gate. Ibrahim unloosed his load and it fell to the ground, and Omar, feeling himself a seasoned load carrier, attempted to unload himself as did his father, but the rope did not give way. It became entangled with the vines and Omar struggled to loosen it. When at last the load fell to the ground it brought Omar down with it. Ibrahim gave a short laugh, while for a moment he forgot his painful thoughts of the coming winter.

Early on the morning when he was to appear before his teacher, Omar folded his Koran in his small bundle of clothing, placed it under his arm, and departed from his father’s gate into the street. He saw

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

boys chasing donkeys and heard caravan leaders shouting and cursing their beasts that were too tired to move. Omar trotted along, hardly realizing that he was soon to be in the home of the great teacher.

The Imam's house was some distance from the tentshop, and Omar passed through parts of the city not familiar to his eagle eyes. The architecture created a different atmosphere, for it was somber and dignified in appearance. There were few children playing in the streets, and the air was laden with less noise than in his own section of the town.

He thought, "I must be quiet, but where does my master live?"

Omar wished to be the first in his teacher's house, for it was understood that the boy arriving for the first time in a new school would be the first in the class. He halted a *parash* who was passing importantly by.

"I am your sacrifice, will you show me the Imam's house?"

The officer gave Omar a dark face.

"Why do you ask me where the Imam lives? What are you, a thief?" And the officer gave Omar another black look.

"No, in the name of Khoda," replied the student. "I am going to his house to begin my studies."

"You are no student," snorted the officer. "Students do not dress like mule drivers."

THE HOUSE OF THE IMAM

Omar became indignant when the officer referred to his poor clothing.

“Fine clothes do not make good students.”

“What makes a good student then?”

“Knowing the Koran,” replied Omar, and he pulled out the holy book and showed it to the officer.

“Can you read?”

“No, I can not read.”

“Ho, with that fine coat and shining dagger you can not read! And what can you do except whip people?”

“Who are you?” demanded the officer. “And who is your father?”

“I am Omar, the son of Ibrahim, the tentmaker.”

“Oh, you are the son of Ibrahim? May Khoda give him long life and a place in Paradise. He is pious and visits the mosque every Friday. In the name of Khoda, he will some day make a tent for me. Come, I will take you to the Imam’s house.”

Omar walked importantly beside the officer, taking two steps to one of the man’s strides.

“Here is the Imam’s house,” said the *parash*. “Now there is a big dog in the courtyard, and it is very vicious, therefore I will go in with you. The dog will not attack me, for we are friends.”

“How so?” said Omar.

“Because he sees me every day, and occasionally I give him bread and cheese, and he is grateful for that,” added the officer.

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

“A grateful dog is better than an ungrateful man,” spoke Omar.

The officer gave him a pleasant look this time, for he knew the wisdom of what Omar said.

The *parash* and Omar entered the court. The dog rose and looked ugly for an instant, but soon began shaking its tail, and, with its nose to the ground, trotted to the *parash*. The officer gave the dog a piece of cheese and patted its head and rubbed its ears. Then he pointed to Omar, indicating that he was a friend.

The Imam came out of the house and thanked the *parash* for conducting his new student safely. Omar walked proudly with the great teacher through an arched doorway, beneath a balcony that was upheld by five great wooden pillars, carved by the master wood carver of Naishapur. The door opened into a hallway paved with shining tiles, from which a curving stair led to the upper chambers where Omar, Nizam and Hassan were to live during their student days. These rooms were removed from the apartments of the Imam’s family, and the students would go and come by this stairway without ever seeing the other members of the household.

Nizam had already arrived, and the boys greeted each other joyfully.

“How did you pass the dog?” asked Omar.

“It was terrible,” responded Nizam. “Khoda

THE HOUSE OF THE IMAM

knows if the Imam had not appeared the dog would have eaten my heart."

As Omar and Nizam were thus exchanging greetings, a murderous howl sounded in the courtyard below. Hassan had made his appearance with the escort of a servant. The dog made a leap on Hassan and tore his fine coat to pieces, but in return the vicious animal received a good clubbing at the hands of Hassan's servant.

"Can you not be a gentleman, Loti?" called the Imam from the balcony. When the dog heard its master's voice, it reluctantly left Hassan, and the servant withdrew, uttering oaths in the name of Khoda that such a dog would soon die.

All three boys were now safely in the Imam's house.

Since Nizam had arrived first, he was made the first in the little school. Omar, having arrived second and Hassan third, respectively took their places at the feet of the great teacher.



CHAPTER VI

THE SEED OF WISDOM

Now began a new life for Omar. For days at a time the boys saw no one but their teacher and the servant, Hatim, who attended to their simple wants. The boys rose early in the morning, at the call of Hatim. Omar, accustomed to early hours at the tentshop, was usually the first to rise. Nizam would slowly rub his eyes, stretch his muscles, and shove himself out of his bed, and in a minute or two Hassan would crawl out sullenly. The boys went out from their sleeping quarters into the courtyard, where there was a pool of clear water. Omar rolled

THE SEED OF WISDOM

up his wide sleeves and washed his hands. Then he took out a wooden comb, the shape of a half moon, and combed his hair. Nizam and Hassan did the same, and now they were ready to begin their day of school by first partaking of their breakfast of bread with mast and honey. They squatted on the floor and ate from the common bowl, dipping their bread into the thick sour milk.

Having had their breakfast, they entered the study, which was warmed with charcoal in a brazier, and sat on the reed-covered floor. Nizam sat close to the charcoal fire, Omar sat next and after him came Hassan, and they began studying their lessons.

Without a thorough study of the Koran, no knowledge was complete, and the great Imam drilled his three students in the principles of the holy book and interpreted the meaning. Omar soon distinguished himself by his fine memory. After reading his lesson twice he could repeat it word for word, but nevertheless he was not greatly interested in the word of Allah.

“Who knows,” he would say in his own heart, “that this is the truth?” and with that he forgot his soul, and turned to his mathematics. “Ah, here is the truth! Two and two make four, and no one can deny that.”

Nizam was interested in the Koran more than any other subject, for the Koran satisfied his legal mind, and the interpretations cited by the great

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

teacher became equally as important as the holy book itself.

Hassan was the least studious of the three. He cared little for the Koran, and the science of mathematics taxed his mind too much for comfort. But he had to excel in something, and he chose calligraphy. When the teacher praised the fine curves and artistic lines with which he embellished his writing, that pleased him greatly.

A step was heard on the stair, and soon the Imam entered the study room with all the dignity that befits the profession of teaching.

“*Khob*, what have the boys been doing this morning?” he said, with a twinkle in his eye. “Not fighting with each other, I hope?”

“No, master, we have been reading our lessons.”

“So I trust. Give me proof of your diligence by reciting Sura III from the holy book.” And Nizam, with fine voice, recited the chapter as though he were performing before Khoda.

“Your seriousness can not be questioned,” responded the teacher, “and you will become a great leader and law-giver of Iran.”

Now Omar recited the same chapter. Even though he had it memorized in two readings, yet his voice was the voice of indifference. The teacher gave him a stern look, then had him take his book of mathematics. Omar’s eyes sparkled as he listened to the discourse on mathematics; and the Imam, though

THE SEED OF WISDOM

he doubted Omar's regard for religion, yet never for one moment questioned his interest in the science of numbers.

"I shall expect great things from you, Omar, in this field, but knowing and believing the word of Allah is most important."

"I am your sacrifice," cried Omar, "but why do we call Khoda by the name of Allah in the school-room and read his word in a strange language? Why was the holy book not written in Persian? Our language is much sweeter than Arabic."

"Because the great prophet to whom Khoda revealed His will was an Arab and not a Persian."

Omar still wondered why one of his own countrymen had not received the divine revelations, but he had a wise head and kept his further thoughts to himself.

"Now, Hassan, recite to me the word of Allah," said the Imam. The teacher had for some time doubted the sincerity of Hassan, but he knew his lessons and no pupil can be harshly dealt with when he knows his daily task and performs it well. Hassan repeated the chapter with trembling voice and with such effect as to charm even Omar.

"Hassan," said his teacher, "you are doing well in the Koran, but let us hope that you are sincere in it, as your voice indicates. Now let me see your writing exercises."

Hassan handed his first, for he was first in the

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

art of penmanship. Nizam was next and Omar last. Omar's handwriting was heavy and exceedingly plain. Hassan's handwriting could not be duplicated. His strokes were perfect. Now the teacher was satisfied that he had three students that excelled one another in their own fields. "Khoda be praised," he said, as he left the three boys to themselves again.

Hatim called the boys to lunch. They rushed out like hungry bears that had not had anything to eat all winter. The common bowl, which contained *shorba*, was placed before the hungry students, and ravenously they ate the savory stew, dipping it out with pieces of the flat, hard bread. At this time of day, studies and aims of life were forgotten. Hatim made a second call, bringing with him cheese and more bread. Omar enjoyed this simple food, for it was the kind of food eaten in his own home. He took a long flat piece of bread, spread it with cheese, and folded it twice.

"Khoda be praised," said Nizam, as he finished his last portion of food.

"Yes," said Hassan, "may Khoda give us plenty to eat."

Nizam, being the eldest of the three, proceeded first to his studies, and earnestly and with great reverence opened the pages of his Koran. Omar took up his mathematics, and Hassan started copying a portion of the Koran, embellishing it as he went along.

THE SEED OF WISDOM

The sun was now making headway toward his evening rest. The shadows of the poplar trees that circled the Imam's courtyard grew gradually toward the east and cast long and pointed lines upon the ground. It was now time for afternoon recitation.

“Are the boys ready?” a voice was heard calling beneath their study room. This was the call of Hatim, the servant.

“In the name of Khoda, we are ready,” said Nizam, and the three boys descended to the Imam's garden. The teacher was now walking in the winter sunshine, and repeating the Koran as he strolled. A little girl was running beside him, bouncing her ball of many colors on the flat stones of the walk around the tiled pool. This was Laylí, the child of the Imam's old age, the eye of his heart, who was allowed many privileges that her older sisters, long grown to womanhood, had never had. Laylí had never been restricted, as they had been, to the women's quarters nor to her mother's garden, enclosed with high walls.

“How are my students, and how many verses of the Koran can you repeat to me?” the Imam greeted the boys.

Omar this time knew more verses than Nizam.

“Memorizing is a gift from Khoda,” said the Imam, “but do you understand the meaning of the word as Nizam does?”

“That I can not tell,” responded Omar, “for I

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

know nothing of the hereafter. But this life is good enough. I will use it and enjoy it."

The shrewd Hassan said nothing, neither believing nor denying the meaning of the book. At each step, when Omar became controversial in the points raised in the Koran, the eyes of the Imam twinkled, for he was too great a teacher to discourage Omar from having thoughts of his own.

"Learn, my boy, learn," he said, "but be sure to practice what you learn."

"Yes, master," said Omar thoughtfully. "Knowing the Koran is one thing and practicing it is something else."

"If every one would practice the teaching of the Koran, this universe would be perfect," spoke Nizam.

"How?" responded Hassan.

"Because everybody would be good, and if everybody were good there would be no *parash bashie*, and the office of the governor of Naishapur would be vacant, for, when people do no wrong, what need have they of governors to watch them and jailers to punish them?"

"Khoda be praised," said the Imam as he was exercising his students under the shadow of the poplar trees in the cold fresh air of declining day. "This is enough for to-day. My blood is too thick and can not stand much cold."

The teacher left them, and the boys began playing leap-frog and throwing a ball of yarn about,

THE SEED OF WISDOM

but soon their play was ended by the call of *azan* from the mosque. Saying the prayers was a part of the curriculum of the great teacher, and the boys turned their faces toward the setting sun and observed the common practice of their fathers.

Their school day had now come to an end. The Imam was satisfied and the students were happy. The sun dropped behind the hills and soon Naishapur was in darkness. Omar lighted the lamp and they all crowded together under it to study their lessons for to-morrow. Hassan yawned. He was growing sleepy. Nizam had buried his head in his Koran and Omar was figuring out his equations.

“Have we not studied enough for to-night?” spoke Hassan. “Is it not time now for some recreation?”

Nizam’s eyes were tired from the poor light, and he rubbed them and closed his Koran. Omar went ahead with his figuring, shaking his head mournfully. His equations were not coming true, and he would not sleep that night until a positive answer was had. He ran his hand through his hair, twisted his mouth, and finally gave a big yawn, stretching out his lean arms toward the ceiling above him. At last a lovely expression came to his face. His eyes twinkled and his mouth wore a broad smile.

“I have solved the problem, and the next will not be so hard to solve.”

“You have worked enough for the night,” said Nizam. “It is time now to rest.”

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

“Well said,” responded Hassan. “Omar, tell us the story of Zal and Rustam.”

Omar could not be persuaded. Had Nizam asked the favor it might have been different. Omar had made friends with Hassan, but he did not love and trust him as he did Nizam. Hassan was the grandson of Hadji Mukhtar, and a crust of the same loaf.

“The night is very clear,” said Omar. “Let us go out and watch the rising moon. It is a full moon and it will look as big as the white bowl from Ispahan we saw the other day.”

“The moon and stars are too far away to be of any importance to me,” said Hassan. “I like to be entertained.”

“*Khob*,” spoke Omar, “what is more beautiful than to look at the heavenly things that Khoda has created?”

“It is cold outside,” said Hassan.

“The air is clear and I am not afraid of it,” remarked Nizam, and Omar led Nizam and the reluctant Hassan down from their room into the courtyard. They climbed to the housetop to view the rising moon, and as they ascended the last step a silver rim was seen emerging from the horizon. The boys watched the moon as it rose completely.

“How wonderful the moon is!” said Omar. “Now it is full and it will soon become smaller and smaller.”

“That is the part I do not understand,” said Hassan. “The sun is always the same.”

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

“Maybe some one some day will find out why it is.”

The lamp was still flickering away as the boys returned to their room. From lack of attention it was almost dying out. The boys undressed for the night, and Omar, being the last to retire, approached the lamp and gave it a whiff which blew it out.

“In the name of Khoda, why did you do that? It is bad luck to blow your breath against pure fire,” cried Nizam. “Do you not know that our ancestors from the days of old have had a great regard and respect for fire? It will surely bring us bad luck.”

“But the light is out, and what are we to do about it?” said Omar.

“It is best to light it again and put it out with your fingers. It is not good to play with fate.”

“What is to be, no one can change,” said Omar. “But if it will make you sleep better I will do as you say.”

Omar, after having lighted the lamp, took hold of the wick with his thumb and forefinger and squeezed the flame out. The room was now in complete darkness. Omar closed his eyes, but before him the moon was still rising and the stars were still shining until sleep overcame him and prepared his tired mind for another day.



CHAPTER VII

THE DARK ANGEL

MEANWHILE the fears of Ibrahim the tentmaker were realized. The grain that had been gleaned from the fields of Naishapur in the scanty harvest had already been exhausted. It was now the end of winter, and the wheat chests of many homes were nearly empty, and the hand mills every day did less twirling than the day before.

“Khoda have mercy upon us,” said Ibrahim one evening when his wife informed him that there was only enough wheat to supply the family for half a moon.

THE DARK ANGEL

“Our neighbor, Abasi, told me their wheat chest is empty,” responded Ibrahim sorrowfully, “and they would be grateful if we could give them a few measures of wheat.”

“But Khoda knows how little we have.”

“*Khob*, what must we do? Let Abasi and his family starve?”

“Then give them what you think should be given.”

Ibrahim took a measure of wheat and delivered it to his neighbor, saying, “Khoda will be kind to everybody if we are good to each other.”

Now Abasi was a man of good quality, and in return he presented Ibrahim with a bowl of nuts and a full measure of raisins, even though he was denying himself such luxuries. Bread he must have, for without it the thread of life would soon be severed.

But there were certain places in the realm where wheat was plentiful and cheap. The grain merchants, knowing the shortage of wheat in Naishapur and its outlying districts, made haste to load up their caravans and send wheat to the starving people. The golden grain soon began pouring into the grain market, but who was able to purchase such a precious article? Now nothing but gold could buy the wheat and sustain the thread of life.

Ibrahim had made two tents, and he took them to the grain market to exchange them for wheat. All his labor and fine work would only bring two measures of wheat.

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

“Khoda knows,” he told the grain merchant, “this will last but from Juma to Juma; and what then?”

“Khoda knows,” replied the grain merchant.

“But I can not let you have all this work for so little wheat.”

“*Khob*, if you can not, then go and eat your tents.”

Then Ibrahim took his tents across to another grain merchant.

“Give me wheat for my tents.”

“Khoda knows that wheat is hard to be had, but since I need tents on my journeys I shall give half a measure. That will keep you alive for a day or so.”

“I am your sacrifice, but I have a family, my wife and two daughters.”

“And do you not have a son?” asked the merchant.

“In the name of Khoda, I have a son,” replied Ibrahim proudly.

“Do you not feed him, too?”

“No, he lives in the household of Imam Mowaf-fak, the great teacher.”

“Son of a dog,” shouted the grain merchant. “Any more lies from you and I shall throw you in that aqueduct and drown you like a rat.”

“No hope, no hope,” thought Ibrahim, and he returned to the first merchant and exchanged his tents for two measures of wheat.

THE DARK ANGEL

Now famine began in the city of Naishapur. The wheat, even the supply of rice and beans, was exhausted, and the price of the golden grain soared high. The grain merchants tightened up the strings of their wheat sacks harder and harder. The hungry people stripped the bark of the trees and ate it. Even the pet animals were not spared, for hunger is stronger than affection. The caravans of wheat from Ispahan and Hamadan kept coming, but the worldly goods were valued higher than human life, and life perished every day.

Even at the door of the Imam, the spectre of hunger knocked, and the three students, though they had enough to eat, found their appetites curtailed.

“May your morning be blessed,” the Imam one day greeted his students. “I have given all my gold for the poor and have opened my storehouse to share with the needy. I have reduced my own eating, for an old man needs very little food.”

Omar did not wait to have his teacher tell them what they were to do.

“I can do without a second piece of bread and without honey,” he said.

Nizam responded that he also could do without honey on his mast. Hassan said nothing. He was not in the habit of curtailing his pleasures for the sake of others.

When the boys were called to breakfast next morning, the bowl of mast was placed in the middle of

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

the floor as usual, but there was no honey and only three pieces of bread.

“This would taste better with honey,” Hassan grumbled. “It is on your account that I have to do without it.”

But Nizam reminded him that they must curb their appetites for the sake of the poor. While they were thus arguing over the fact that they had to do without honey, the lanky Omar was having more than his share of mast. Soon the bowl was licked dry, and none had enough. In front of each student was placed an egg. They cracked the shells and drank the eggs, for the Imam believed that eggs should be eaten almost raw.

At noonday there was only bread and cheese. Hassan could not eat bread and cheese without sherbet, for in his father’s house he was brought up with luxuries. But Nizam did without sherbet as Omar did, and did not mind the lack. His humble spirit adjusted itself to difficult tasks, and doing without sherbet at this time was an act of piety.

One day Omar went on a visit to the tentshop. He had not yet realized the full extent of the hardship that was being endured by the common folk. Now he learned that two children in his father’s neighborhood had already died of hunger, and he saw with anxious eyes that his own parents and sisters looked very pale and thin. There was still food in the house, but very little, and Amina doled it out

THE DARK ANGEL

carefully, for it would be many weeks until there could be hope of a new harvest. Omar returned to his teacher's house in a sorrowing mood. Even the Imam, with all his wealth and piety, could not feed everybody. Many would surely starve, unless help came from Khoda in some unexpected way.

“Omar, why do you have that veil of misery on your face?” asked Nizam, as the young tentmaker returned at sunset to the study room and opened his books under the lamplight.

“The people are dying of hunger,” said Omar, “and the grain merchants have no feeling for them. There is plenty of grain, they say, in the market, but its price is its weight in gold and who can buy? The hungry people should go to the wheat market and help themselves. If the grain merchants attempt to stop them they should be thrown in the aqueduct.”

“That would be uprising against authority!” cried Hassan, much alarmed by Omar's excited manner.

“What is authority when the people are starving?” And Omar's eyes blazed with indignation.

Nizam looked at Omar with sympathy. “The people can not go hungry too long or something serious will happen,” he said. “If authority can not help Khoda's creatures, it is worth nothing. But what can we do?” And he tried, like Omar, to put

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

aside these perplexing thoughts by diligent attention to his lessons.

Meanwhile the Imam was anxiously pondering the same difficult problem. Each day more people came, and smaller and smaller portions of food had to be given out, that none might go away empty-handed. Soon the large storehouse would be empty, and what then? Long and earnestly the Imam meditated, seeking the will of Khoda.

The Imam did not appear at the accustomed hour to hear his students' lessons. Instead Hatim came to say that there would be no recitation that day, and that Hassan was desired to come to the Imam. In some wonderment, Hassan arose and followed the servant. Omar and Nizam, left alone, looked at each other with serious faces that betrayed their unspoken thoughts. Perhaps sorrowful tidings awaited Hassan.

Hassan stood in silence before the Imam. Hatim withdrew, and the teacher and the student were alone. The Imam looked with his keen eyes into Hassan's face.

"I desire, Hassan, that you go to your grandfather with a message. I send it by you that this may not be known to any one else. Tell your grandfather that he must help the hungry people. It is the will of Khoda, and to Khoda shall he answer if he does not extend his hand in mercy. He is the lord

THE DARK ANGEL

of Naishapur. It is in his power to open the stores of grain and distribute to the people according to their needs. If he should refuse, you are not to come back to my house, and all Naishapur shall know why the governor's grandson is no longer my student."

Hassan listened with his eyes cast down, in the respectful attitude of a pupil before his master. He knew what the Imam might suspect. Hadji Mukhtar was one of the greatest grain hoarders in the city, and he was reaping profit from the people's misery. Hassan was shrewd enough to know that the Imam had pricked the very spot wherein his grandfather might be wounded. Verily, the Imam was the wisest of men, and Hassan, though he cared little for his teacher's piety, always respected the great learning and the authority in his voice. Hadji Mukhtar himself did not appear more the man of power.

"Is it my master's wish that I go to my grandfather at once?" asked Hassan.

"Yes, go now. You can not tell him too soon," said the great teacher. "And tell him also that a few of these grain merchants should be bastinadoed in the Maidan Khana."

"This he will do," replied Hassan, for he knew how cruel his grandfather could be to make a show of justice.

Hassan spoke the truth, for he returned to the Imam before sunset with the message that Hadji

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

Mukhtar would obey the wish of the Imam as the will of Khoda. Early in the morning the lord of Naishapur had trumpets to be sounded at all the gates of the city. He had announced throughout the town that, as head of the government of Naishapur, he was having the grain merchants whipped for their cruelty and inhumanity, and all the storehouses of wheat and rice would be opened, that the people might have food and regain their strength.

The people then had plenty to eat, and several grain merchants were thrown into prison. Hadji Mukhtar, when he did anything, did it thoroughly, and he had the grain merchants stripped of all their possessions to be divided among the needy. They were then as poor as the people whom they had tried to starve. That made some people happy, for human nature is vindictive, and they rejoiced that Khoda had in time taken His vengeance.

But the act of mercy and charity had come too late for many, for the great suffering of the people had reduced their strength, so that it could not stand the invading force of cholera which followed in the wake of famine. Many old folk and little children perished, even many of the strong. One night the dark angel visited the home of Ibrahim and took away Bulbul, the younger sister of Omar. Bulbul had seen only six summers, and her cheeks were as beautiful as the rose petals of Shiraz. She was buried in the old cemetery near the tentshop. A

THE DARK ANGEL

flat stone was placed over her grave, and nothing could disturb her from her long sleep.

Every one was now in great fear, and a great cry went to Khoda to stop the plague.

“O Khoda,” cried Omar, “my little sister is gone! My uncle and my two cousins have departed from life, and I saw dead lying in the streets of Naishapur. Is there any force that can stop this plague?”

That night a little wind blew over Naishapur and snow fell sparingly on the new graves and covered the flat stones with a white mantle. The fresh wind brought life and healing, and gradually the stricken city was freed from the plague. But the sun of Nurooz rose over sad hearts and grief-stricken households. The plague had left many mothers without their first born, and some parents had lost the only child they had. There was no rejoicing over the end of winter. None had the heart to bring glad tidings to his neighbor. Every family stayed in their own home beside their own charcoal fire. Merchants went to their shops without hope of doing business. By the sign of the sun, beginning its longer circle, spring had come, but it was still the winter of solitude and grief in the hearts of the people.

Omar sadly left the tentshop to return to his teacher’s house.

“Who knows the will of Khoda?” he thought. “He

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

gave us earth in which to plant our seed and the sun to make life and heat. Then He sends hail and destroys what gives us life. He visits us with plague and pestilence, and takes away my little sister. What is the answer? O Khoda, what is the answer?"

The wind, blowing through the limbs of a dead *chinnar* tree, seemed to wail, "No one knows. None has seen and none can understand Khoda."

Little Bulbul had gone, the nightingale had flown, but no one knew whither. Then Omar held his head in his hands and wept.



CHAPTER VIII

THE POTTER'S HOUSE

THE lord of the universe was making longer and longer journeys every day across the sky, and was continually swinging his course toward the northern plain of Naishapur. The storks and nightingales were once more in the neighborhood, and the air was full of chirpings and song long before sunrise. The nightingale that was nesting in the Imam's court-yard had just ceased his golden melody as Omar opened his eyes upon the spring air, fresh with the morning dew. He dressed quickly and shouted to his companions, almost bursting with the joy of living.

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

“Arise, my friends, arise, for the sun has risen and the light is everywhere!”

Nizam opened his eyes into a shaft of light that had lighted the top of a tall poplar tree and sharply descended through a small window into the boys' room.

“Up with you, up with you!” they both cried to Hassan. “Long ago the stars have fled before the sunlight. You know this is our day to spend in the bazaars.”

It was the habit of the Imam, when the days became longer and spring had come, to take his students at least one day a week into the fields and gardens of Naishapur to reveal to them the ways of nature, or into the market place to show them the various products that were made or sold in the city.

The boys were soon ready for breakfast, which was quickly eaten and forgotten. This day they need not follow the regular routine of their daily tasks. They proudly followed their teacher into the court-yard. The dog eyed Hassan with suspicion, for, ever since Hassan's bodyguard had clubbed it, the dog had never made up with him, and it was only because it had such a high regard for its master, the Imam, that at times it did not attack Hassan. The dog gave a growl now, looking at Hassan as the Imam and his students passed.

“I do not understand this dog of mine,” said the

THE POTTER'S HOUSE

Imam, as they stepped out of the courtyard gate.
“He is always in bad temper.”

“The dog likes me,” Omar cried. “The other day he loosened his chain and ran and jumped all over me.”

“There must be some attraction about you, Omar,” said Hassan. “He always growls at me.”

“The dog does not bother me,” spoke Nizam.

“It must be something wrong with Hassan,” said the Imam, with a twinkle in his eye.

“What are we going to see to-day?” cried Omar as they were passing a potter’s house near by.

“I have made no plans,” answered the Imam, “but we shall find something of interest before the morning is over.”

Omar looked at the pots that were standing by the wall of the potter’s house and wondered how they were made. “It would take a skillful hand to mold such things from the common clay,” he said to his teacher as they turned in the opposite direction.

The Imam looked at Omar. “If you wish to see a potter at his work, we can visit Master Sadig to-day. He is the best potter in the city of Naishapur and he knows all about clay. I have seen him shape the clay on his wheel. If he is not too busy, we can spend the morning in his house.”

“In the name of Khoda,” cried Hassan, “who would be too busy to stop his work to visit with you?”

The Imam did not notice the compliment, but

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

silently led the way to the gate of the potter. Hassan had tried to flatter his teacher before, but the great man seemed interested in nothing but lessons well learned. Nor did the Imam make flattering remarks when his students recited their lessons in a brilliant manner. The boys soon learned that, when the teacher found no fault with their work, that was praise enough.

The Imam, with his three students, soon found himself standing before a big double door that led the way within the potter's yard. The door was distinguished from the neighboring gateways by two large bowls of pure blue color, standing one on each side of the door. No one ever mistook this house for any other than the establishment of Master Sadig, the potter.

The teacher bade Omar give three knocks at the door, which was opened by an apprentice.

“In the name of Khoda, what is that you desire?” the apprentice boy greeted the Imam and his three students.

The potter, being busy with his wet clay, had bidden his apprentice to open the door, and, if he found the caller was not on the mission of doing business, he was to be dismissed.

“We come to see Master Sadig. Tell him that Imam Mowaffak is here with his students, and they desire permission to watch him work and see his pots of clay.”

THE POTTER'S HOUSE

"Khoda be praised, we are weak before your presence. Enter, pray. Do you have Omar with you, too?" said the apprentice boy.

Omar gave the boy a look of surprise. "I am Omar. Why do you ask for me?"

"You were an apprentice in tentmaking as I am in the potter's trade," explained the boy bashfully, "and I have heard of your now being the student of the Imam. It made me happy to hear of an apprentice meeting with such honor. I shall always pray for your great future."

The Imam gave the boy a pleased and kindly look as he passed through the gate. This boy, he thought, might in time become a greater potter than his master, whose work was the finest in the city of Naishapur.

Breathlessly the apprentice boy ran into the house and announced, "Khoda knows, the Imam of Naishapur is here. He is in the courtyard."

Sadig looked at him surprised, but he did not doubt his apprentice, for he had never yet found him to be anything but truthful. Wiping his wet hands on his mud-spattered apron, he walked out into the courtyard.

"Khoda has been good to me to lead your feet into my house," he greeted the Imam.

"It is Khoda's will that we come here," responded the teacher.

Omar looked at the potter. He was a ruddy-faced

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

man of middle age, dressed much like his own father. He was, like Ibrahim, a master of his trade, and Omar respected him at once. The teacher began introducing his students one by one to the potter.

“This is Nizam,” he said. “He is well versed in the Koran, and is to be a future law-giver of Iran. This boy is Omar.”

“Oh, yes, I know,” said the potter wisely, “the son of Ibrahim the tentmaker. From the tentshop to the feet of the great teacher is a far journey. What will be his work in the future?”

“He will be a scientist, a mathematician, and Khoda knows what he may accomplish.”

“What will this boy be?” asked the potter, as he looked at Hassan.

“Khoda knows,” said the Imam, not feeling sure of Hassan’s future. “But he is already accomplished in the art of calligraphy.”

Then the Imam requested the potter to fetch them some water to drink, for the walk had made them all thirsty.

A vessel was soon brought by the apprentice, and made its rounds, beginning with the teacher. The Imam lifted it to his lips, but before taking a drink he spilled a few drops on the ground.

Omar watched his master. “Why do you spill some water on the ground?” he asked.

“It is best, my boy, to give water to our ancestors first, lest we forget what we owe them who gave us

THE POTTER'S HOUSE

life. We, of course, do not see their souls, but we can give drink to the earth that received their bodies ages ago."

Nizam took the vessel and followed the teacher's example. Then Omar threw a few drops for the earth to drink before he drank himself, and Hassan, who already knew the custom, spilled a few drops on the ground. Although he did not care much for his ancestors, yet it was the part of wisdom to quench the fire of thirst in some one's soul.

The teacher and his three students followed the potter as he conducted them into his establishment. The apprentice trailed behind, eyeing the visitors as though they were angels from heaven, and keeping his bright eyes mostly upon Omar, the son of a tentmaker. The boys gave close attention to what the potter told them as he led them round and showed them his pots and explained the processes that gave them the fine glaze and beautiful colors. There were vessels of all shapes and sizes. Some were leaning against the wall, and others that were newly made the potter had placed on the floor to dry.

Omar viewed the potter's wheel with eager curiosity, and the Imam requested the favor for his students of seeing how a pot was made. The good-natured potter was proud of his skill, and at once took up the lump of wet clay that he had laid down to greet the Imam. It had partially dried out in the interval and he immersed it in a bowl of water and

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

worked it up wet and sticky into a round mass which he placed on his wheel. Keeping the wheel turning, he deftly manipulated the clay, shaping it with his skillful hands, hollowing out the round mass, molding the thin and curving sides, until the texture of the clay was right and the shape perfect to the eye. Then he stopped the wheel, and the bowl stood still, its wet sides smooth as glass.

“What skill, what wonderful skill!” cried Omar.

“But this clay is wonderful, too,” said the potter, taking up another bit and working it in his strong fingers. “Clay has life even as we have, and it is the most important part of the universe besides the sun. See how a seed planted in the soil in time shoots forth. The clay makes a way for it to come and breathe the fresh air and sunshine. It nurses the seed as a mother does her child. We are all made of clay. The first man was made from clay and the last man will turn into clay. How do we know but that some of these very pots are not the flesh and blood of some departed soul that long ago passed behind the veil? Some of my clay was brought from Ecbatana, the ancient capital, where many kings and princes have been buried in generations past. It may be some of these vessels are portions of them.”

“Queen Esther is buried near Ecbatana,” said Omar, for the Imam had told his students of the Jewish girl who had pleased the great Persian king and become his queen.

THE POTTER'S HOUSE

“That is true,” responded the potter. “And the vessel from which some one tastes in joy may be made of the clay of her beautiful frame, turned to dust these ages gone. It may well be, and, in fact, I believe that my pots have understanding. When I am shaping a pot or working with my clay, I can sometimes hear it whisper, ‘Gently, do not be too rough with me, brother.’ And when I feel the clay vessels are talking, I gently put them in water and begin to polish the rough spots, almost caressing the clay as though it were my own child.”

Omar had spied a pot half hidden behind some others, a poor crooked thing that looked out of place with the beautiful shapes that surrounded it. The potter saw Omar’s eye fall upon the misshapen vessel, and wagged his head solemnly.

“A dreadful time I had with the clay that was sold to me from the fields of Kashan. None of the vessels that I made from it were good, and I destroyed all of them but this one. All my labor was for nothing, but it was impossible to make a perfect vessel from that clay of Kashan.”

“Why so?” asked Omar curiously.

“Khoda only knows,” responded the potter. “But I know this: I have not yet met a good man from Kashan. All the Kashani merchants must be watched. They will steal the pupil of your eye while you sleep.”

“But could it be the clay that caused the pot to

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

be so crooked? Is the clay of Kashan so different from other clay? Perhaps your hand shook when you were molding the pot."

The potter gave a merry laugh, and directed a roguish look at the Imam. "Khoda knows this boy is unusual. I will have to be truthful about it, and may Khoda forgive me for lying. I started my work one morning in low spirits, and was accomplishing nothing, so I took some wine to stimulate me. But I took too much as I went along with my work, and toward the end I was drunk and my hand shook, and this is one of the vessels I made. I did not destroy it, but keep it just to remind me that wine in a potter's house has no place."

"Then you drink no more?" asked Nizam seriously.

"Nay, I can not do without the stimulating juice, but I do not drink when I am working. I go to my wine cellar and have a good refreshing drink after my labor for the day is done. I have a favorite wine jar, one that I made myself, and it and I have been companions for years. It understands me and talks to me. Every time I take a drink from it I can hear it whisper, 'Drink, potter, drink, for once you are gone you are gone.' "

"Do all the vessels talk to you, master potter?" inquired Omar.

"Only a few. Most of them just listen and seem to be satisfied with their lot. Even the ones who talk do it only now and then. They have their moods just as we do."

THE POTTER'S HOUSE

“What do they say?” pursued Omar, who found the potter’s talk fascinating.

“They talk more sensibly than some people,” said the potter, who was now at his best, enjoying to the full the opportunity to discourse upon his trade to the students of the great Imam. “This perfect bowl, made from the clay that I dug myself from the consecrated soil of holy Meshed, spoke a message that would interest your ears, Wisest of the Wise,” he said to the Imam. “I made it one Juma morning after I had returned from the mosque, and it spoke these words to me, ‘Surely you will make a splendid thing of me, master potter. You would not take my clay from the ground for no purpose.’ Could one of us say more to Khoda who shaped us as I shaped this bowl?”

The Imam looked at the potter in some surprise to find a philosopher among the pots of clay. They were about ready to depart, for it was nearly time for *azan*, according to the course of the sun. But Omar had not any desire at all to leave the potter’s house.

“I am your sacrifice, one more question,” he said, turning to the master of clay, for he had remembered something. “Once a water carrier gave me a drink in my hands, and I found the water tasted sweeter than it does from a clay cup. Now, master potter, explain to me the reason of that.”

“Why do you ask me,” said the potter, “when you have the wisest man of Iran for your teacher?”

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

“But no one knows about clay as you do. And I was only reminded of it here among your pots.”

“Yes, my day begins and ends with clay,” spoke the potter, “and I have learned to know it well. I can feel life in my clay as I can see it all about me. All clay vessels have a bitter taste because the earth receives back into itself the impurities that inhabit the clay bodies of men. When the soul leaves the body to ascend to heaven it must be purified, for to enter Khoda’s presence it must be as pure as Khoda made it. It leaves behind in the clay body all the impurities and bitterness of this life, for the body has served its purpose and needs not to be purified.”

“But would it not be easy for Khoda to create a pure body, too, in which to place the pure soul?” inquired Omar earnestly.

“Of course, of course,” replied the potter.

“Then why did Khoda place such a pure thing in such a clay house?”

The potter found that question too difficult, even for his ready wit, and the Imam came to his rescue, saying quietly, “We must depart, and now let us thank Master Sadig for his instruction and the time he has given to us.” The Imam was a firm believer that truth was known only to Khoda and that it was not wise to inquire too far into Khoda’s purposes. Thus he blocked many of Omar’s queries.

They all saluted the potter as they left. “Khoda keep your head,” Master Sadig said to Omar. “You

THE POTTER'S HOUSE

must come again. I never knew a tentmaker could have such a son."

As they left the gate, Omar took another look at the master potter. He saw him wandering among his pots. How real they were, and how important his trade of potter was to him! He loved his clay and took joy in his work. It was no wonder he was the finest potter of Naishapur.

The party silently made its way through the street. The Imam was busy with his thoughts, and the boys watched with interest everything they passed. The call of *azan* came from the tower of the Juma Masjid as they reached its gate. They all knelt upon the grass in the courtyard, making their supplication and praise to great Khoda. Omar bowed his head down and prostrated his body on the ground. As he lay thus against the grass he seemed to hear a sound coming back to him from the earth, a faint whisper that called him, "Brother."



CHAPTER IX

THE HOLY ROAD TO KERBELA

SUMMER had come, and the Imam had now heard his students' last lesson for the year and had pronounced their work good. This time Omar had made some equations in algebra himself and explained his solutions to his teacher. Such a mathematical mind was beyond the understanding of Nizam and Hassan. When they asked Omar how he could make problems in his head and answer them at the same time, Omar would point out to them that somebody had done such things before and why could not he?

Nizam had always had a great respect for the small head of Omar. "What a mind, what a mind!" he

THE HOLY ROAD TO KERBELA

said now, running his fingers through his hair. "I am being much troubled proving the equations that are already made for me, and Omar makes and solves his own."

But Hassan shrugged his shoulders. "Khoda did not make every one alike," he said, and glanced proudly over his fine penmanship.

The Imam looked at his students. They were all full of hope, and the future had no fear for them. But one thing he thought they lacked, and that was real piety. The Imam was now growing old and, feeling that his thoughtful soul would soon return to Khoda, he was planning to make another journey to Kerbela and visit the bloody plains where Houssein, the son of Ali and the grandson of the Prophet Mohammed, had suffered and died. The city of Kerbela and its plain had been sacred to the Persians ever since Houssein and his little band of followers had been murdered by the order of the usurper who had stolen the office of Caliph. This had happened in the month of Muharram. The first ten days of the month were now observed in commemoration of the martyrdom of Houssein, and services of mourning were held everywhere throughout Persia. The Imam, who was himself a descendant of the Prophet, through the martyr Houssein, was planning to travel to Kerbela to be present at the very spot of the martyrdom during the observance of Muharram, which this year fell in late summer.

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

Should he take his students to Kerbela and show them the place where the martyrs of old had gained the Prophet's Paradise? He thought it would be an act of piety on his part to take these boys in the bloom of their youth, for who knew what effect the pilgrimage might have on them?

When the time came for the last walk together in the garden, the students found the Imam seated in the shadow of the wall, sipping sherbet from a blue cup. Laylí stood beside him, holding a tray of copper, for she had brought the refreshing drink to her father.

"Here are the students," said the Imam. "Will you not bring sherbet for them, too, my *sákí*?"

The young cupbearer went back to the storehouse across the courtyard, and soon returned, carefully holding the tray with three other blue cups of the finest workmanship of Master Sadig, the potter. With eyes cast down, she offered the sherbet to her father's students.

The boys sipped the sweet and cooling drink, and the little cupbearer departed with the cups and the tray. The Imam rose and strolled with his students along the rose-covered wall of the garden. Now he told them what he was about to do.

"My days are few," he said. "Just how many more seasons I can teach the will of Khoda, no one knows. I am about to make a pilgrimage to Kerbela. If you

THE HOLY ROAD TO KERBELA

wish to go with me, I will make the plans and we can start by the new moon."

Omar's eyes twinkled. He cared not for holy Kerbela, but the adventure of going so far from home and seeing so many new things fascinated him, and he would have done almost anything to be taken on the journey.

"But how can a poor boy go to Kerbela?" he asked his teacher anxiously.

"Omar," replied his teacher reproachfully, "who has asked you about money? I am doing this for the sake of Khoda, and some good that it may do you. Khoda will reward me in Paradise."

"Who knows," Omar thought as he looked down in deep contemplation, "that Khoda does not hear this good man?" And he asked Khoda to forgive him and teach him to know the truth.

The Imam instructed his students to be ready by the appearance of the new moon to make the pilgrimage to the holy plains of Kerbela.

"Now," the Imam said to Omar as the boys departed from his household next morning, "this will be a very important journey, and it will also give you the opportunity to do good to your dead relatives."

Omar knew what the thoughts of the great teacher were. Had he not heard from the lips of his father that his own grandfather was still this side of Paradise for not having had his bones removed to

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

Kerbela? He very thoughtfully went home to tell of his good fortune. He entered the gate and found his father at the loom. Ibrahim looked at him with great joy.

“My son, my son Omar, we are glad to have you home once again. I have much work this summer and many tents are to be made.”

“I should like to help you, Father, but by the new moon I am taking the holy road to Kerbela.”

“How is that possible?” cried his father.

“My teacher is doing it. He is taking all three of us on the pilgrimage.”

“How glorious and wonderful!” shouted Ibrahim. “Now the bones of my father can be buried in the plains of Kerbela with the bones of Imam Houssein.”

The tentmaker had talked about a pilgrimage to Kerbela for years, but was too poor to undertake it, and there were the bones of his father still buried in the old cemetery of Naishapur.

“Khoda is great, Khoda is the light of heaven and giver of all good things!” he cried to his wife. “Khoda has made it possible, through our dear son, Omar, to receive my father into Paradise, where the Prophet and all the Imams have their abode.”

Amina was all piety. She at once decided to make the finest basket in which to carry the bones to Kerbela.

“Nay, nay,” said Ibrahim. “It is better to make a bag.”

THE HOLY ROAD TO KERBELA

To that Omar agreed. "It will be easier to carry than a basket."

So Ibrahim started weaving a bag out of the same material of which he wove his tents. Digging out the bones of loved ones to be taken to the holy plains of Kerbela, in order for them to be received into Paradise, was a mystery to Omar, but he willingly accepted the task of helping the soul of his grandfather.

Omar had not long to attend to his preparations for the pilgrimage. There were many things to be done. A pilgrim's dress and shoes had to be made. His dress was made of the fabric of his father's tents, and cloth slippers were made by his mother. Comfortable slippers would be needed by the pilgrims for tramping over the plains of Kerbela, and Omar was lucky to have his slippers made at home by his own mother, for they were measured to his feet.

One morning, while the dew was still on the ground, Omar betook himself to the grave of his sister. Bulbul had been dead now for five moons, but to Omar she had fallen as a rose of yesterday. He solemnly walked toward the cemetery, passing a little stream that made its way through the vineyards and gardens of Naishapur. Its limpid water brought thirst to Omar's throat. He leaned lightly upon the bank, over the tender green grass, and drank deep. Then he rose and looked about him. Delightful blossoms met his eye everywhere. He avoided as

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

much as he could stepping on the flowers, for who knew, he thought, from what once lovely form they sprang unseen?

Omar walked a little distance to traverse the stream, until he came to a dead tree that the great storm of the past summer had caused to fall and thus make a bridge over the water channel. He balanced himself with a stick till he reached the other side. Then he turned around and looked at the dead tree. It bore no leaves and it would no more give fruit of its kind, but there was still use for it, he thought, since it had fallen over the water and people might walk on it. Had it fallen because of Khoda's plan?

Omar came to a low mud wall that separated the cemetery from a garden of roses. He jumped over it in the name of Ali, for climbing a wall, or jumping over an aqueduct, or doing anything in which a mis-step might cause an accident, was to be safely accomplished by calling on the prophet, Ali, the patron saint of the Persians. Omar's feet fell on a flat stone that covered the body of a Naishapurian of long ago. He walked here and there through the cemetery until he came to where Bulbul was hidden beneath the couch of earth. With tears in his eyes that splashed down on the flat tombstone, he placed a handful of roses that he gathered from the wall over the head of his lovely sister. Then he returned home, taking short and thoughtful steps as he ten-

THE HOLY ROAD TO KERBELA

derly walked over the green herbs that were springing from the earth.

The bag was now ready and the removal of the grandfather's bones from their resting place was about to be solemnly conducted. Early in the morning Ibrahim, taking the bag, a shovel, a heavy iron rod and a rope, went with his son, Omar, to the grave of his father.

Omar stood over the grave that held the bones of his grandfather, and Ibrahim, with shovel and pick, started to remove the flat stone. But before striking the ground where his father's body was buried, he first called on Khoda and Ali, the Persian prophet, to help him in his task. Little by little the stone was removed. Omar and his father placed it on another flat stone that had covered the body of a townsmen only lately. Then Ibrahim took his shovel and removed the earth, reverently placing it on the grave-stone. He kept on digging until he came to the bones. Omar helped to gather the bones of his grandfather, and one by one they were placed in the bag.

It was a solemn occasion for the young tentmaker, for it was the first time in his life that he had seen a human skeleton. That the flesh of his grandfather had turned into dust was beyond question. Even some of his bones seemed to be missing. The nails were gone, and the fingers that had made many tents were no more. They searched until they could find

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

no more bones, and, having decided that their duty was well done by the old tentmaker, Omar and his father fastened the bag with the rope of camel's hair, and then both worked to cover up the empty grave, which in time would be filled by another leaf that would soon fall from the human tree. Omar wished to carry the bag. They were the bones of his grandfather and he was to be the custodian of them until they were safely deposited with the bones of Houssein and his faithful followers who had died in the bloody plains of Kerbela.

Slowly father and son returned to the tentshop. Omar removed the bag from his aching shoulder and placed it reverently beside the stump of the fallen cherry tree that had shaded the old tentmaker in its prime. They were both now hungry and thirsty. Amina greeted them as though she were meeting angels.

“Khoda be praised. *Ya Ali*, your duty will soon be accomplished. The food is ready and I have brought water to wash your hands and face.”

Omar waited for his father to take the first drink, and when his own turn came he followed the ancient custom of pouring a few drops on the ground, but this time his eyes fell on the sack of bones, and he went to it and spilled a few drops upon it. Amina called them to a steaming dish of *shorba*, and, as they sat to their meal, they all gave thanks to Khoda, the light of the world, the commander of

THE HOLY ROAD TO KERBELA

heaven and earth, may His name be praised and glorified.

The new moon was now about to make its appearance, and the arduous journey to holy Kerbela would soon take place. Omar's parents were greatly concerned about their son's pilgrimage.

"How long will you be on the road?" asked Amina anxiously.

"The teacher said it will take a whole moon and maybe more to reach Kerbela, and half that time to visit the holy tombs and the great school."

"I did not know there was a school in Kerbela," said Amina.

"Why, to be sure," spoke Ibrahim. "It was there that the Imam himself received his wisdom."

Amina was pleased to know that, but a whole month's journey was very long to one who had never been out of Naishapur. "Khoda will take care of our son," she said. "The spirit of Houssein will safely conduct him to Kerbela and bring him back to us."

Amina had baked much pastry, and had specially prepared a saddlebag for Omar, in which to keep his belongings on the journey. They had made a woolen blanket from the wool that Ibrahim had bought to make his tents. All pains were taken to give Omar a proper start.

One day about sunset a servant of the Imam ap-

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

peared at the tentshop to say that, according to the time they had set for the journey, they were to depart in two days.

The Imam had made all the arrangements. In addition to taking his three disciples, he was taking his servant, Hatim, to look after the camels and provide for his comfort during the journey. Hatim was overjoyed to go, for the bones of his father had been waiting for many years in his grave at Naishapur, and no son was worthy of his father who did not, if the opportunity arose, make the journey to Kerbela and provide a resting place in its consecrated fields for his parents.

One lovely morning, such as can be seen only in the fields of Naishapur, the Imam, with his cavalcade, started to the holy city of Kerbela. Nizam and Hassan, being the sons of wealthy parents, had been provided by them with camels and many provisions. Omar's father was too poor to hire a camel for his son, and the Imam supplied the beast. The dignified teacher led the procession through the streets of Naishapur, riding on a white camel. He was followed by Nizam, his eldest disciple, then came Omar and Hassan. The last in the procession was Hatim, who rode his camel as proudly as a sultan. Only he and Omar had bags that contained bones of relatives, for the families of the Imam and his wealthy students had had such rites performed long ago.

THE HOLY ROAD TO KERBELA

The cavalcade passed through the gates near the tentshop. Ibrahim and many poor folk were waiting to bid farewell and ask the blessings of Khoda on the pious pilgrims. Ibrahim kissed the garments of the Imam, and even the neck of his camel, and with tears streaming down his face he kissed the velvet cheek of his son and the bag that contained the bones of his father. Ibrahim was happy now. His father's spirit was to be safely conducted by his own son to the Paradise where the great souls of all ages were resting. At last the Imam commanded his camel to lead the procession, after the beast had been kissed by all the pious and poor people who could not carry the bones of their fathers to Kerbela. Ibrahim was more grateful to the Imam than he could express in his poor language.

“May your place never be vacant,” he said as he again kissed the white neck of the fortunate camel that was taking the Imam to faraway Kerbela.

Even Omar was now stricken with piety. He had never seen people so humble in all his life. He rode his camel with a feeling that he was indeed on a holy mission, and that Khoda, the great Creator, was watching over him and his beast.

Soon Naishapur disappeared from their view. They passed fields of wheat and rice and finally came to a great incline. The camels trailed along, shaking themselves proudly. On the summit of the pass, there was a *caravanserai*. Hatim looked at the sun

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

and the shadow of his camel. It was time for rest and refreshment.

“O center of knowledge,” he said to his master, “it is time for every one to gain strength. Let us rest.”

“If Khoda be pleased,” said the Imam.

Hatim then stroked the knees of his camel until it bent its head forward and knelt on the ground. Hatim dismounted and approached the white camel and gave its knees a light touch with his whip. The camel obeyed at once and came down on its knees. “*Ya Ali*,” said the Imam as he dismounted. Nizam and Omar and Hassan were soon running about, stretching their legs. They followed their teacher as he proceeded toward the *caravanserai*, and Hatim led the camels aside and tied them together to a tree.

“We have a long road before us,” spoke the Imam. “This is my tenth pilgrimage and, who knows, it may be my last.”

“May your place never be vacant,” said Omar, remembering the phrase from his father.

“As long as I have three disciples like you,” said the Imam, “my place will never be vacant, for I know at least one of you will carry on my work after me.”

They had their bread and cheese. “Khoda be blessed,” said the Imam as he ran his lean fingers over his long white beard, and the boys and Hatim said, “Khoda be blessed,” as they also prepared to

THE HOLY ROAD TO KERBELA

mount their camels for another half day's journey. Omar went to his beast and inspected the white bag. Everything was all right. Hatim helped the Imam to mount his camel, and now they descended toward the bottom of the pass. As they reached the valley, a party of horsemen met them.

"Maybe they are robbers," thought Omar, "but who would hold up the party of the Imam?"

They exchanged salaams and went on their way. The day was now coming to an end, but no one knew the road better than the Imam.

"We shall spend the night yonder," he said as they were approaching the gates of a town. He pointed to a large building graced with shining tiles and tall minarets. It was a *madrassa*, and no one, not even the king, had more right to stop for rest at a place of learning than the Imam.

Hatim again made himself useful by attending to the needs of his master. He unloaded the camels and took the precious sacks of bones and placed them in a dark corner of the courtyard. They ate their supper and soon every one was asleep, for the first day's journey is always very tiresome.

In the morning their party grew, for they were met by other pilgrims who had felt the desire to go to Kerbela to observe Muharram. Almost every day the small band of pilgrims was met by others, and before they had traveled many days a caravan of a hundred camels was stringing along to the holy

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

plains of Kerbela. In every hamlet and city they were met by the devout inhabitants, who paid them homage and respect and in return were blessed by the Imam and promised prayers for their dead relatives.

The cavalcade of a hundred camels kept moving day by day toward the holy city of Kerbela. At the *caravanserais*, where they stopped for rest, Omar saw that his grandfather's bones were close by him. Had he lost the precious load it would have been a calamity hard to explain to his father, Ibrahim. Many of the pilgrims were carrying sacks of bones, and every one was careful not to lose or exchange his load of bones for another's.

Days passed and now they were near the great desert. It was thought that in crossing the desert all kinds of dangers might befall the traveler. The country roundabout was infested with sand flies and scorpions and vampires. The first night they camped in the desert, Omar heard the story of the vampires. They were creatures that Khoda had made with the bodies and feet of men and the heads of birds. At night they would come and prick the feet of the travelers with their beaks and suck their blood. Omar was not inclined to believe that such a tale was true, but nevertheless there might be such creatures as vampires in the desert.

In the middle of the night, Omar was awakened by a sting under his foot. He opened his eyes

THE HOLY ROAD TO KERBELA

quickly. The moon was shining as brightly as the early morning sun. He looked about but nothing could he see. The pain of the sting became greater and greater. "O Khoda," he cried, "what can it be?" He shook Nizam who was sleeping near him.

"Nizam," he cried, "I am bitten by something, maybe by a vampire!"

Nizam came to his senses and fear seized him. The vampires might soon have him. Very quickly the whole camp came to life, and by the light of the moon an examination was made of Omar's foot, which was now swelling. The Imam put on his robe and came to his student's rescue.

"It is no vampire, so be not afraid. You are bitten by a scorpion."

Then he opened his medicine bag. With a small knife he bled the wound and bathed it with scorpion oil, and commanded the others to find the scorpion that had bitten Omar.

"I have found it!" cried Nizam, shaking out Omar's blanket.

"Then give it to me." The Imam bruised its head and placed it on the wound. "It is finished," he said, "and there will be no more danger."

Next morning they were all ready for another day's journey. Omar was feeling better.

"Go this way," said the Imam to his camel, "to avoid the depth of the desert," and they all followed.

One man died in the desert. Omar felt sorry.

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

“But,” cried one of the pious ones, “his death will be a blessing to his family and they will be benefited by it ever after, for to die on the road to Kerbela is double piety.”

They soon emerged from the desert and made straight ahead for Kerbela. But they had brought with them in the folds of their blankets and the hair of their camels some of the sand flies. They were all warm and tired and restless. But Omar heard one brave voice from the tail of the caravan.

“If you would sleep sweetly go to Kerbela,” sang a weary traveler to the rhythm of the camel bells. “There is where you will find rest.”

A sand fly was pricking Omar continually, and his body was soon covered with festers. He heard again the voice from the rear of the caravan.

“If you would sleep sweetly go to Kerbela. There is where you will find rest.”

“May Khoda hear your song,” said Omar, “and soon bring us to Kerbela.”



CHAPTER X

THE PROPHET'S PARADISE

AFTER many days the city of Kerbela became visible in the distance. The blue tile domes of the mosques and the famous *madrassa* sparkled in the sunlight of midafternoon.

“By sundown,” said the Imam, “we shall be resting at the great *madrassa*, where I was a student many years ago.”

Just without the gate of the city the great caravan stopped. Before them was an immense wall that circled a large tract of land. This was the great cemetery which contained bones from all over Persia, Arabia and Afghanistan. Here the Imam bade

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

Hatim carry in his precious sack of bones and dig a grave for them near the wall.

“Khoda knows,” said Hatim, “I have done my part with my father’s bones. This is the battlefield where Houssein and his followers were slain. The ground is consecrated.” And thus, in the name of Houssein, he buried his father’s bones.

“O master,” Omar asked the Imam, “what am I to do with the bones of my grandfather? Is this not the place for them?”

“There is a special place to deposit the bones of your grandfather. They shall be as near as possible to where the bones of my own people are resting, in a cemetery near one of the great mosques. Such burial places are especially designated for those known for their piety.”

When Omar heard this he was doubly grateful. How proud, he thought, his father would be when he was told that the old tentmaker’s bones had been placed near the bones of the Imam’s father!

The sun was descending quietly behind the holy mosque of Houssein as the Imam and his party passed proudly through the gate of Kerbela. The pilgrims went into different parts of the city, finding *caravanserais* to stay in during their sojourn, and those who were unable to pay the price of a *caravanserai*, or could not be accommodated, slept in tents outside the city. But the Imam had already

THE PROPHET'S PARADISE

planned where he and his disciples were to stay. He led the way through the bazaars, every one paying him respect as he passed. The shopkeepers bowed before the green-turbaned scholar as he rode by with his disciples. They passed several *caravanserais*, but the Imam rode on. At last they came to a great building.

“This is the *madrassa* where I studied when I was a boy. There is always a room ready for me. You shall not be far from me. The boys’ quarters are now empty, except for those who live far or wish to stay for Muharram.”

The Imam rode through the gate with his small band of pilgrims. Immediately the caretaker, who had met the Imam on every one of his visits and had supplied his wants, took the camels, removed their burdens and led them under a large mulberry tree. The white camel came to his knees first, then the other camels knelt down and stretched their weary necks on the ground.

The Imam’s arrival had been announced and the head of the *madrassa* came to welcome him to the abode of learning. They were old friends, for they had gone to school together as boys. The learned man of Kerbela looked with interest upon the three boys.

“Are these your grandsons?” he asked.

“No, they are my three students from whom I expect much.”

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

Omar was looking straight at the *mustahed*, who smiled into his eyes.

“This boy is a dreamer. I can tell it from his eyes. Does he know the Koran well?”

“He does,” said his teacher, “but he excels in mathematics. It is this boy,” turning to Nizam, “who not only knows but understands the word of Khoda. And this one is Hassan. His handwriting is perfect. In the name of Khoda, he may some day be secretary to the Shah, for only the greatest caligraphers can fill that office.”

The Imam, with his saddlebags, was taken to his room, and Omar and his friends shared the room of a student who had gone to his home in Kashan. Night came quickly, and the weary travelers lost no time in going soundly to sleep, in spite of the sand fly bites from which they were still suffering. But in the morning the discomfort of itching skin, which had been almost forgotten in extreme weariness, was felt more than ever.

“How can I ease myself?” Omar said to Nizam as he dressed.

“These sand fly bites began to smart as soon as my eyes were open,” responded Nizam.

Hassan was very sullen. He did not communicate his thoughts to his fellow students.

“Why are you not saying something?” said Omar. “I am itching all over.”

“I venture to say that the Imam is suffering more

THE PROPHET'S PARADISE

than we are," said Nizam. "No doubt his beard is full of sand flies. *Khob*, to-day everybody will go to the bathhouse. The only cure for sand flies is a good hot bath."

Soon after their early breakfast, the Imam, who was in need of a hot bath as much as his students were, took them to an imposing building in the center of the city of Kerbela. Thousands of pilgrims, weary from their long journey, were seeking rest and relaxation in the *hamams* of Kerbela. The great *hamam* of Akbar Ali, with its high white marble dome and tiled pool rooms and many cells for dressing and undressing, was the center of social gatherings and exchange of experiences of the road. When the Imam walked in, with his long flowing robes and green turban, every one stepped aside, for all knew that he was not only a holy man but had come from the seed of Mohammed.

"O center of knowledge," cried the *hamam* keeper, "when did you arrive? I have not seen your soul for many moons." And very graciously the Imam gave him his blessing, while, with twinkling brown eyes, he expressed his gladness that he was again in Kerbela.

"Now these three boys shall have a cell for themselves," said the *hamam* keeper. "They are not so big that they can not get along together. Are they your sons?"

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

"No," explained the Imam, "they are my students."

"They are fortunate to study in the shadow of your great learning, and they will acquire much honor, coming to Kerbela so young."

The teacher and his students parted, going to their own cells and little pools of water. Omar was first to undress and he walked carefully over the slippery floor to the pool and descended into it. What a glorious feeling he experienced. It was the first *hamam* he had been in. Before that he had taken his baths in the streams or in his father's courtyard in summer, and in winter in the stable or in the house.

The good bath refreshed them wonderfully. The Imam was the first to finish. He came out dressed in new garments, with his beard combed and dyed with henna. He indeed looked like a holy prophet, ready to enter into Paradise. After a while, Omar and his friends had had enough. They put on fresh clothing and trailed their teacher with an air of importance until they reached the *madrassa*.

Now they were ready for the great excitement that was to follow during the next ten days. They had reached Kerbela just two days before the beginning of Muharram. There were thousands of pilgrims in Kerbela and its surrounding neighborhood,

THE PROPHET'S PARADISE

and the streets and mosques were thronged with pious Mohammedans from all Iran, and even Afghanistan and India.

“Why are all these people here?” said Omar to his teacher. “Have they all come to bring the bones of their fathers to be buried in the battlefield of Houssein?”

“Many come to perform that duty to their parents. Others come in penitence.”

The next morning was the first day of Muharram, beginning of great anguish, not only to the pilgrims at Kerbela but to all pious Mohammedans of Iran. From the first day of Muharram until the tenth, when he was killed with his faithful followers, Houssein had been hunted down and besieged on the plains of Kerbela, surrounded by his enemies and tortured by thirst. The events of each day were enacted in a passion play, culminating in the tragedy of the martyrdom on the last day.

Omar walked out with his friends into the streets. There were tents pitched here and there, covered with black cloth and other objects of mourning. The mosques could not accommodate all the people and some of the great meetings would be held in the parks under the shade of trees, or in the tents, erected at the expense of rich men to gain favor of Houssein and hope of Paradise.

On this first day of Muharram, crowds of pilgrims mingled with the inhabitants of Kerbela and

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

gathered in the streets to begin the celebration. Some one shouted, "Hassen, Houssein, *Ya Ali!*" And the whole crowd took up the cry. Soon every one with loud cries in unison implored Khoda to punish the killers of Houssein and his small army of sixty followers.

Omar followed the Imam and his companions as the procession marched to a mosque near by. The leader of the band had unbuttoned his shirt and his breast was bare to the waist. He began beating his breast with his fists. Soon a company of fifty or more had their shirts torn open and, in the name of Houssein, were beating and pounding their breasts at each step. As they neared the mosque, the name of Houssein resounded in the clear air of Kerbela and the beating of breasts became more violent. Every breast was now red and bruised. Very seriously Omar viewed the frenzied mourners.

"Why are they doing all this?" he thought to himself, but was unable to answer the question. Then he turned to Nizam. "Why are they doing all this?"

"It will take them closer to Paradise," said Nizam.

"What is this Paradise?" wondered Omar further.

"Have you not heard that there is a tent for every pious believer in Paradise, made of pearls, rubies and emeralds?"

"In the name of Khoda, who makes these tents?" cried Omar.

THE PROPHET'S PARADISE

“Everything is possible in the hand of Khoda,” answered Nizam seriously.

Hundreds of companies paraded the streets of Kerbela, shouting the name of Houssein and cursing those that had taken part in the killing of Ali’s son. The rich and learned refrained from injuring themselves. They stood by, looking pious and crestfallen, but beyond that they did nothing. They spent money in erecting tents in the streets where pious people might assemble and mourn. By doing that they thought they might obtain their passport to Paradise.

Omar was viewing the whole proceeding with eager eyes. He had witnessed year after year the celebration in his own town, but nothing like this had he ever seen before. His father, Ibrahim, though a devout follower of Mohammed, had never taken part, except by going to the mosque and listening to the words of a *mullah*. Ibrahim had, of course, grieved that Houssein had been tortured, but he had never wounded himself for his sake.

The crowds gained momentum as they marched. Now bands of small boys came, following their leaders and beating their breasts with their fists, shouting the glories of Houssein and cursing the names of his enemies. They came and stood in front of a mosque. A *mullah* with a huge white turban came out and praised them for the good work they were doing for the cause of Houssein. The leader, at hearing the holy name mentioned, became more exhilarated and

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

began again crying the name of Houssein and was followed in unison by other small boys. Omar viewed them with a doubtful expression. He again turned to his companions.

“Why are they doing this?”

“They also want to enter Paradise,” answered Nizam.

“What do they know about Paradise?”

“I do not know,” said Hassan, “but in time I venture to say they will make good Mohammedans.”

“Why do you not join them?” asked Omar. “This is the easiest way I know to reach heaven.”

“*Khob*, why do not you?” interrupted Hassan.

“I know nothing about Paradise. Has any one come to tell us about it?”

“No, yet there may be such a place.”

Nizam turned to Omar and Hassan with a disturbed expression.

“How should you boys say whether there is a Paradise or not? It is good to believe,” he said.

Just at that time the Imam came out of the mosque with tears in his eyes. The morning pageant was over. The participants in the great tragedy were comforted by their families and friends and were given extra food that day. They were martyrs to the cause and they wanted everybody to know it.

Omar rose early on the second day of Muharram. His teacher was now more sorrowful than the day

THE PROPHET'S PARADISE

before, because the day of the killing of Houssein was approaching. In the morning the bands again gathered in the streets and marched back and forth through the bazaars and business places. Shopkeepers left their booths unguarded to view the passing processions, for these ten days no one would think of stealing or doing harm to his fellow man. The second day the excitement became higher than the day before. The bands became larger and more vociferous. Omar still watched, but Nizam joined a band of young men who were being led by a student at the *madrassa*. He did not tear his shirt. He solemnly walked along. Hassan also joined him, and after a while Omar stepped out and took his place between his schoolmates.

“It is no trouble to walk with these people, and this may do me good if there is a Paradise, and if there is not it can not do me harm.”

Omar followed the procession into the mosque and knelt down in the mighty gathering. A sermon was preached and the names of Ali and his sons, Hassan and Houssein, were praised.

“Paradise, the Prophet’s Paradise, is within your reach, O believers, these few days. Khoda will repay you for every tear that you shed.”

There was much weeping done on that day and the days that followed by stouthearted men who never knew what crying was except during the days of Muharram.

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

Every day the great crowds increased in strength and zealousness. Toward the end, the excitement was so high that the participants knew not what they were doing. On the last day they were in frenzy, and Houssein's death was to them actually happening on that very day. The heat was almost unbearable, but the play went on, and actors and spectators forgot their discomfort in weeping over the fate of the hero, Houssein.

Omar and his friends wept with those around them, for it was a story to move the hardest heart, and to see it before their eyes was to share in the fate of the brave but doomed Houssein. Near the end, when the Prophet himself appeared for a moment to sustain the despairing spirit of his grandson and give him courage for the final trial of his martyrdom, the boys were thrilled with the voice that spoke. Their teacher had been given the great honor of taking the part of the Prophet. His sweet voice captivated the hearts of all. Tears began flowing now as never before. *Mullahs* passed among the weeping believers with cotton in their hands, gathering the tears of anguish and hope and squeezing them into pitchers. Omar stood motionless. He had never heard his teacher so eloquent.

The play was at an end. The martyrdom was over, and Houssein had gained the Prophet's Paradise. The Imam was concluding the great ceremony this time. When he had finished, many crowded to

THE PROPHET'S PARADISE

kiss the robe of the holy man and to ask for some of the precious tears. Little flasks were given to all who asked.

“What are these tears for?” asked Omar of his companions, “and of what benefit are they?”

Nizam knew. “They can cure the sick man if he is about to die, and, should he pass from this life, if his hands and feet are bathed in tears that flowed from the mourners at Kerbela, the Prophet will receive him at once into Paradise.”

Omar said nothing. Muharram was now over, but he was still wondering about the Prophet’s Paradise.



CHAPTER XI

THE FIELD OF NIGHT

THE thousands of pilgrims were now leaving Kerbela. By this time Omar had acquired a new title. He could ever after be known as Kerba Omar, signifying that he had made the pilgrimage to Kerbela. All three boys were pleased with this new distinction, for not many of their age could boast the title, but the proudest of all was Hatim, who was already beginning to put on airs, as he thought how he would lord it over the other servants in the Imam's household when they returned to Naishapur.

Hatim had made ready the camels, had fed them

THE FIELD OF NIGHT

and given them water. In the cool of the morning, while the sun was still behind the Kerbela hills, the Imam, his students and Kerba Hatim, left the plains of the holy land for the hills and meadows of Nai-shapur. Overhead the stars still shone, and they directed their course toward a large and radiant star that hung like a beacon light in the east. The measured sound of many camel bells, some faint in the distance, echoed through the air, lending a somber and lonely aspect to the long journey ahead.

Omar was already anxious to be at home. How proud he thought his father would be and his mother, too, that he had been to Kerbela so young! He was impatient to greet them, and when he thought that he must travel many days his spirit left him. Then there were the sand flies. He hoped Khoda would spare him from their invasion. At times he was perplexed as to why Khoda did not take a hand in the affairs of the devout pilgrims. He remembered the good man, on the journey toward Kerbela, who had fainted and fallen from his camel and soon after was lifeless on the road. Omar was beginning to fear for his own life. The hazards connected with making the pilgrimage seemed too great.

“What are you thinking about?” Nizam asked Omar, seeing his serious face.

“I am thinking about that poor man who fell from his camel and died on the road. Much can

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

happen within a moon. Suppose you or I should become ill and die."

"*Khob*," answered Nizam, "if we do, it will be the will of Khoda."

Nizam was not troubling his mind about what might happen, and Omar banished his own gloomy thoughts as the sun peeped over the edge of the distant horizon. He soon forgot about the dead pilgrim, and watched the lord of the heavens mount his throne in all his glory, while the stars hid their faces. Even the bright star in the east that had outshone all the stars of the sky had disappeared.

On the road they were joined by other travelers headed toward the east, and the long procession of solemn-faced devotees wound across the plain, with the white camel of the Imam leading the caravan. At night they stopped at a *caravanserai*, and early in the morning, while it was cool, they loaded up again, as they did every day till they reached the desert land. When they came to the edge of the desert, Omar's heart sank within him. Oh, the sand flies, oh, the sand flies! He already began scratching himself, imagining them biting and boring themselves into his skin.

The travelers became tired and haggard on the road before they reached a desert well where they could dismount and refresh themselves and their camels. They stopped beside the well, longing for the cold water. But evidently some careless traveler

THE FIELD OF NIGHT

had failed to weight down the rope with a big enough rock and it must have fallen into the well after the wooden bucket.

“Curses on his grave!” spoke Hatim.

“May Khoda burn the bones of his father!” said Hassam.

“There is nothing to be done except that one of you boys descend into the well and fetch up the rope.”

Omar was first to volunteer.

“I will go down,” said Hatim.

“So will I,” spoke Nizam.

“Only one can go. Omar spoke first and let him be the one.”

Omar took off his sandals and descended into the well, carefully feeling with his bare toes for the niches left at intervals in the stone wall. He reached the bottom and looked up. There were Nizam and Hassan standing at the brim of the well. They looked like dim shadows, but beyond them, high in the sky, stars shone as though at midnight. Omar gave a gasp.

“The sun must have gone for the night,” he said, and yet he knew that could not be possible, for the day was not yet over. Omar felt for the bucket and grasped the wooden handle, with the rope knotted round it. He pulled out the rope to its full length and tied the free end tightly about his body. Then he gradually climbed out of the well. As he was ap-

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

proaching the brim, the stars disappeared and the sun was once again shining in all its glory.

“The stars are still in the sky,” said Omar as he looked up. “I thought they disappeared to get out of the way of the sun, but I saw them while I was in the well.”

Hassan doubted his word.

“Khoda knows I am telling the truth. If you do not believe me, go down and find out for yourself.”

Hassan had his sandals off at once, but was obliged to wait until the bucket had been drawn up several times to quench the thirst of the travelers and the camels. Then, while Hatim covered the end of the rope with a stone so large that it had to be rolled to the spot, Hassan ventured into the well.

Soon he came up, as excited as Omar. “I have seen the stars in the sky as I have seen them in the field of night!”

Then Nizam descended in his turn. The Imam had said nothing of Omar’s discovery. He merely stroked his beard and smiled.

“Then the stars do not run away from the sun?” asked Omar of his teacher.

“Where would they go?” responded the Imam. “They are always there, making the circle of their courses.”

“How can one learn about these stars that seem so far away?” asked Omar.

“It is a great study, my boy, and has fascinated

THE FIELD OF NIGHT

the minds of wise men from the earliest times, for in observing the movements of these wonders of Khoda's creation they have sought to understand the ways and purposes of Khoda. In my youth I was a student with the great Abul Wafa of Baghdad. He was then studying the variations of the moon, and making the remarkable discoveries that brought him fame."

Omar's eyes opened wide with interest. "What is the variation of the moon?" he asked eagerly.

"The speed of the moon's motion is not always the same," explained the Imam, "and Abul Wafa discovered the cause of this in the variation of the sun's force upon the moon."

"Will you teach me, master?" asked Omar. "Is it as easy to learn as mathematics?"

"The two are bound up together," answered the wise man. "The sun and the stars rise and set by mathematical laws, and the moon waxes and wanes with regularity."

"That is what I want to know," cried Omar, "why the sun rises and sets, why the moon waxes and wanes, what holds the stars in the sky!"

The Imam shook his head smilingly. "I can not teach you all you ask. I am too old to learn any more about the science of the stars, but the mystery may unfold part of itself to you; who knows? When we reach the desert *caravanserai* to-night I will show you the map of the heavens. The desert is the place to study the stars."

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

By this time, the Imam and his little party had quenched their thirst and eaten bread and cheese and Persian pastry. Then they proceeded on their journey. The white camel, with its proud head turned toward home, led the way slowly and dignifiedly. Its flat feet kept it from sinking into the sand. When the sun was descending toward the west in a brilliant red sky they arrived at the desert *caravanserai*. Hatim unpacked the beasts of burden, and Omar and the other boys began looking about the sandy courtyard. There were many stalls, each accommodating several pious men that had made the pilgrimage to Kerbela. Soon the innkeeper had slaughtered a sheep and was preparing the meat for the hungry men.

As soon as the meal was finished, Omar eagerly reminded the Imam of his promise to show them the stars, and the teacher found a quiet corner of the courtyard. The Imam looked toward a spot high in the southwestern sky. The rosy sunset clouds were still faintly pink against the paling blue.

“Keep watch,” said the Imam, “for soon Arcturus will shine out. It is the brightest star in the summer sky and appears first after the sun is gone.”

“Do all the stars have names?” inquired Hassan.

“Only the brightest ones,” said the Imam, “and most of them were known long ago and named by the Arabs.”

Omar had been keeping his eyes on the bit of sky

THE FIELD OF NIGHT

which the Imam had pointed out, and now he cried, “I see it! The star has appeared!”

Against the pale blue, streaked with gauzy clouds of fading pink, a bright yellow point gleamed.

“That is Arcturus, the shepherd of the stars,” said the Imam, “for he leads out the host of the stars in summer as a shepherd leads his flock.”

The light of the vanished sun gradually faded from the vault of the heavens, and here and there other little lights twinkled out. Soon the stars were as thick above them as spring blossoms in the meadows of Naishapur. The Imam directed their gaze from bright Arcturus to the great constellation of the northern sky. He showed them the four stars that roughly outlined a rectangle, with three stars extending in a slight curve from the higher left-hand point.

“This figure has from ancient times been called the Chariot; the four stars making the rectangle are the wheels and the three others are the horses. Look just above the middle one of the three horses. Can you see a small star?”

Omar’s eagle eyes descried the tiny point of light. Nizam also found it, and after a moment’s straining gaze Hassan, too, declared that he could see it.

“That is Alcor, the driver of the chariot,” said the Imam. “I can no longer see it, and that is proof that my sight is failing, for the Arabs called it also Saidak, the Tester. Only a good eye can see it. The

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

Chariot is part of a larger constellation called Dubhe, the Bear, because it dwells like that animal in the north. Do you see near the Chariot, but reversed, a similar figure of seven stars? That is the Little Bear. The earliest travelers and seafarers guided themselves by these two constellations, and told the hours of the night by their position, for they revolve slowly, describing a circle in the sky in the time the sun completes his round."

Hatim had dozed off now and then during the star lesson. He finally shook himself and rose to seek his bed by the camels, for to him the night was given by Khoda for sleep and not for gazing at the stars. But a moving flash across the sky caught his attention.

"Behold!" he shouted. "Did you see it, master?"

"What makes you speak?"

"A star just fell from heaven."

"What makes a star fall?" asked Omar.

"Only Khoda knows," answered the Imam, "for it is by His will. Have you not heard how Khoda showed to the Prophet Mohammed the man who should marry his daughter? It was revealed that a star would fall over the house of the chosen one, and the star fell over the house of Ali, who became the husband of Fatima and the father of the martyrs, Hassan and Houssein."

Another shooting star trailed flashing from the heavens, and a few moments later another, and by this time every one was aware of the heavenly dis-

THE FIELD OF NIGHT

play. Several other travelers joined the little group and the Imam became the center of attention in the courtyard of the *caravanserai*. His robes of honor that he wore with dignity made him respected by all, and his wisdom held their ears.

Omar was looking for the patches of light like faint clouds winding among the stars. Many a time from his father's housetop in summer he had watched the River of Heaven and wondered about it.

"What are those?" he now asked the Imam. "They look like clouds, but they do not move."

"That is the Thieves' Road," spoke a traveler from Azerbaijan. "Thieves once stole a great quantity of wheat from some poor farmers, but while they were making their escape Khoda struck them down and spread their stolen wheat over the heavens as a warning to all men."

"That is only a story," suggested a neighbor.

"I am your sacrifice, but could it not be true? It is what every one believes in my country."

Now another traveler ventured an opinion. "It is a sign of safety for lost travelers. Many years ago, when the road to Kerbela was not well known, Khoda created this path of light in the heavens to guide lost pilgrims to their destination."

Omar, at hearing this explanation, looked at his teacher wonderingly. Had Khoda purposely created the path of light for travelers to Kerbela?

"Khoda created it, that is true," said the Imam,

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

“but for what purpose we know not. It was observed in the sky long before Houssein fought at Kerbela, but all the heavenly lights are signs to travelers by land and sea.”

“Yes,” said a weary Arabian traveler. “He who knows the stars is never lost, though he wander to the end of the world. I have been to India and China and back again by the stars.”

It was time to seek rest as Hatim had already done. One by one the travelers sought their beds. Omar lay on his back, sleepless for a time, looking at the stars. Bright Arcturus had passed overhead in its course down the western sky. The Chariot had swung downward and to the east, moving on its ceaseless round, from which it never rested. Unlike men, the stars never wearied. At last, drowsy with much wondering, Omar’s eyes closed, shutting out the starry field of night, but the mystery remained in his sleep.



CHAPTER XII

KERBA OMAR

THERE was now great cause for rejoicing in the tentshop of Ibrahim. A courier had just arrived at the northern gate of Naishapur and had informed the gatekeeper of the approach of the pilgrims from Kerbala. The news spread quickly, and a crowd began to gather by the gate, for it was an occasion of much piety to welcome returning pilgrims from holy Kerbala. The word soon reached Ibrahim, who at once ran to his wife and embraced her affectionately.

“Khoda be praised, Khoda be praised, Omar will

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

be here soon! The gatekeeper has received the news. I shall go to meet him. Put on your *chadar* and follow me."

Very excitedly Ibrahim left the house, not knowing just how long he would have to wait outside the gate to greet his son, who would now be called Kerba Omar. Amina covered herself with her blue *chadar* and with nervous steps walked forth to meet the pilgrims. Ibrahim was soon at the gate, and his joy and excitement were so great that he even embraced the gatekeeper.

"I am your sacrifice, is the news true that the Imam and his party, with my son, Omar, will soon arrive from Kerbela?"

"The courier from Kashan just informed me that he had passed the Imam on the way and within a short time they will all be here."

Ibrahim and his wife waited at the gate, looking toward the road from Kerbela. The day was clear, and the tentmaker thought in his joy that the sky was the bluest he had ever seen. Amina touched her husband gently on the arm.

"In the name of Khoda, I hear the camel bells," she whispered.

Ibrahim placed both of his hands behind his ears and listened.

"I hear nothing," he said.

"Let us go toward them and soon you will hear the bells. Can you not hear them now? Listen, listen!"

KERBA OMAR

Ibrahim again placed his hands behind his ears, but still shook his head and said, "I hear nothing."

Ibrahim and Amina were soon surrounded by other pious folk, eager to hear the news from the travelers and gain the blessing of the Prophet by touching the feet that had trod the sacred ground of Kerbela. Everybody was now saying, "I hear the camel bells." And Ibrahim placed his hands behind his ears. This time he heard the faint tinkle, and also saw the distant camels looming on the horizon.

"They are coming, they are coming!" he shouted. "I see the white camel of the Imam!"

The crowd pushed forward eagerly. The more devout ones gathered dust from the road and smeared their heads with it. As they walked, the dust fell down their necks and streaked their faces, but it was a pious act thus to show humility before the holy men coming from the shrine of Imam Houssein. Ibrahim's heart swelled within him, for part of this welcome was for the young tentmaker himself.

"Khoda be praised! All honor be to Khoda, I see Omar!" cried Ibrahim, for his eyesight was better than his hearing. "There he is behind the Imam!"

Little by little the pilgrims approached toward the crowd that was now increasing in numbers. The pious folk of Naishapur walked forward shouting, and met the pilgrims by the wall of an almond orchard a short distance without the city. Ibrahim ran first to the Imam and kissed the neck of the white

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

camel. Then he stretched up his arms to embrace his son. Omar leaned forward and his father kissed him on both his cheeks. Then his mother showered him with kisses. The whole crowd now surrounded the little party, and the white camel of the Imam proudly submitted to all the adoration and kisses of the pious folk.

Slowly, in the midst of the crowd, the pilgrims from Kerbela moved on toward the gate of Nai-shapur, where another crowd was awaiting them, to make their salutations of respect and ask the blessing of the Imam. The cavalcade passed by the tent-shop. Hatim commanded the camels to stop, and Omar descended to enter his own home.

“Now, my son, tell me all that your eyes have seen,” said Amina, as she put a fine dish of *shorba* before Omar.

“I have seen many things, Mother, but first I must tell about my grandfather’s bones. They were placed in consecrated ground within the courtyard of the same mosque where the bones of the Imam’s father are buried.”

“Khoda be praised,” said Ibrahim as he heard this wonderful news from the lips of his son. “Now my father will ever be happy in Paradise. Who knows, he may even this moment be in the company of the Imams!”

“The journey was very wearisome,” said Omar when the meal was over. “I now need a good bath.”

KERBA OMAR

“You shall have anything that you want,” said Ibrahim. “I have already placed the big kettle on the fire.”

Omar undressed and stood in a wooden tub, pouring the warm water over his shoulders and rubbing his body with a sandstone. Soon he emerged from his bath, clean and refreshed, and dressed in the new garments which his mother had made in his absence.

“Now your future is assured,” said his proud father, “for very few can attain the title of Kerba at your age.”

Omar could hardly have realized the importance of his pilgrimage until he had returned home, for as soon as he was in his father’s house again the neighbors and friends of Ibrahim and Amina besieged their courtyard, demanding to have a glimpse of Omar. A poor woman whose son was ill of fever was the first one to arrive in the courtyard.

Amina greeted her kindly. “What is the state of your son? Has the fever left him?”

“No,” answered the woman sadly. “He is thinner and thinner each day, and unless help comes he will soon see Khoda. Has Kerba Omar brought any tears from Kerbela? If I could only wash my boy’s face with the holy tears of Muharram, he might recover.”

“Omar has brought some tears. Just wait while I ask him.”

Omar was lying on his back, with his hands under

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

his head, looking up at the square of bright blue sky framed by the skylight. He was remembering the well in the desert and the stars shining in the noon-day sky. The stars must still be there, invisible to him now, revolving in their courses ; and he was lost in the wonder of this mystery.

“Omar, Omar, my son Omar !” Amina had to repeat the name of her son three times before she could break his thoughts.

“What is it, Mother ?”

“The widow Yasmin is here. Her son is dying. No one has been able to help him, but she believes you may help him.”

“I am no physician,” said Omar in surprise. “It is best for her to seek the help of the *hakim*.

“He has tried to help the boy, but seems to do no good,” said Amina. “But there is always hope in a mother’s heart. She has come to beg some of the holy tears you brought from Kerbela.”

“If she believes that the tears will help her son, she may have them,” said Omar soberly, thinking to himself that if Khoda had willed the death of the widow’s son no tears could help him. “Give her the tears, Mother, and may Khoda help her and her son.”

“Not all, just enough to wash his face, for we can not spare all the holy tears.”

But Omar did not hear. He was lost again in his own thoughts. “No one can change the will of

KERBA OMAR

Khoda, and no one is born and no one dies before the time known to Khoda.”

Amina took the phial of tears that Omar had brought from Kerbela. She was now thinking of her own father who had become quite feeble and tottered about in his garden, stooped and shaking.

“I can not give the woman all these tears. I must keep some for my father. They will prolong his life.”

She poured some of the precious tears into a small cup, counting every drop.

“Here are the tears,” she said to her friend. “Use them, and may Khoda help your son.”

“Oh, what a blessed woman you are,” cried the grateful neighbor, “to have such a son as Kerba Omar! We are all proud of him, and may Khoda bless his head.”

The sick boy’s mother departed, believing that she had the sure remedy for her son, and, to her delight, the fever left him the next day. All her neighbors rejoiced with her and blessed the tears of Muharram, but Omar said to himself, “It was not the tears, but let them believe what they will, for only Khoda knows the truth.”

There was a constant procession in and out of Ibrahim’s courtyard for the next few days, but the one who came oftenest was Zalam, the father of Amina. He had never in his long life made a pilgrimage to Kerbela.

“Did you bring many holy tears, my grandson?

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

Did you bring enough to wash my body after I am dead?"

Just how many times he asked this question of Omar no one knew, for the old man came every day.

"I am blessed to have the mother of Omar for my daughter," he would say to Amina. "He will take my bones to Kerbela and bury them in the consecrated ground where holy men are buried. Let me bless his precious head. My grandson, my grandson, I have not long to live! I am like a dead *chinnar* tree, standing with leafless branches, ready to fall in the first strong wind. Will you not take me after I am dead and bury my bones near the grave of your other grandfather? Khoda knows the end is near."

"How old are you, Grandfather?" asked Omar.

"I can not tell, but I must be very old. My blood is thick and my eyes are dim. Promise me one thing, since you have been to Kerbela and know the way, that you will take my bones and bury them in the consecrated ground."

"If I live, Grandfather," answered Omar. "For, who knows, I may die before you. How can we promise to do this or that, when we are blind to what the future holds? When I strike my ball, does it know where it will go? But I know, and so does Khoda know what is to happen to each of us, for He is the Thrower of the Ball."

"What do you say?" cried the bewildered old

KERBA OMAR

man. "Since you have gone to study with the Imam, my heart does not understand your words."

Ibrahim was standing by, and now he said, half proudly, half sadly, "I can follow his thoughts no longer, and neither can his mother. Truly, he was not born to be a tentmaker, like me."

Zalam lifted his hands in supplication over Omar's head. "Khoda will keep you," he said, "and you will take my bones to Kerbela."

Omar remained at the tentshop a few days longer, recounting his adventures to his eager parents. But soon it was time for him to return to his teacher's household. The leaves of the *chinnar* trees were already falling one by one, turning many hues. Some were crimson, others were as yellow as saffron. Another year of study was opening for the young tentmaker, and what the new year would mean in his life, only Khoda knew.



CHAPTER XIII

THE FIRE OF SPRING

SLOWLY and quietly the winter passed for Omar and his fellow students, sitting again at the feet of the Imam. Another autumn came and the three boys entered again the household of the Imam. Thus the third year of study together began and drew at last to its close. The three boys had now grown to the stature of manhood. Omar's lean body and thin cheeks were filling out and the change was becoming to him. He was always thoughtful and sober, but now there were thoughts in his mind that he could not understand, longings that study could not satisfy.

THE FIRE OF SPRING

What it was, Omar could not tell. It seemed that his soul cried for something that was not to be found in the Koran, nor even in the wonders of mathematics and the contemplation of the starry heavens.

Spring had waked to life the Imam's garden, and the climbing roses had covered the old mud wall with countless blossoms, white and red and golden. Omar heard the nightingales singing when night fell, and sometimes when he woke before the dawn. The joy of life was in their song, and Omar felt a longing burning within him as urgent as the outpouring of melody that spilled from the throats of the nightingales.

One late afternoon, after the walk with the Imam, Nizam and Hassan were playing a game of chess. Restlessly Omar turned over his books, but finally rose and descended again into the garden. The robins were singing their evening song to the setting sun, whose last golden rays fell through the silver poplar leaves. Omar beheld a slender veiled figure by the pool. He gazed in surprise, for he had never seen any women of the Imam's household. As he gazed, the woman rose and came near him. She passed him silently, but for an instant glanced at him, and he found himself looking into Laylī's eyes. Then the dark lashes veiled them, and she silently moved toward the house, with the gentle aloofness and dignity that the veil had cast about her.

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

After their return from Kerbela, Omar and his companions had not seen Laylí often. Indeed, all the past winter they had never found her in the garden. Now Omar watched her go, still standing dazed by the discovery that Laylí was no longer a little girl. Laylí would no more be seen without the flowing *chadar*, which hid the slender form, the pretty hands and graceful arms that Omar had often seen stretched to catch her ball. It covered even her lovely hair and a veil of fine white silk hid the tulip cheeks.

The shadows were lengthening in the courtyard, and finally the sun disappeared, descending behind the hills and housetops of Naishapur. The clear voice of the *azan* giver sounded from a near-by mosque, reminding the people to give thanks to Khoda that another day was added to their lives. Thoughtfully Omar walked into the house, seeing not the familiar walls and curving stair, but the figure of Laylí gracefully walking before him. He was recalling the form and face whose beauty was now hidden from him. Now he saw her more clearly than when his eyes had rested carelessly upon her, and the lovely picture filled his mind, painting itself upon his memory.

Omar entered the study room as Hatim appeared with the evening meal. The three boys sat on the floor around the common bowl. Omar ate in silence. Even when the meal was finished he said nothing,

THE FIRE OF SPRING

taking no part in the eager discussion that Nizam and Hassan were having over a passage of the Koran they had learned that day.

“Why are you so silent?” queried Nizam. “True, you speak little and laugh less, but this evening you are not yourself.”

“Perhaps,” said Omar. Then with both hands he rubbed his eyes, wondering whether they were the same eyes with which he had seen Laylī moons ago.

“Sit down, Omar. Do not pace the floor so much. You are disturbing my thoughts!” shouted Hassan.

But the restless Omar could not sit down to his books. He went on pacing the floor like a caged tiger. At last he walked to the balcony and looked down into the garden. Two nightingales were perched on a leafy branch of a poplar tree just beneath him. One was feeding the other, and Omar watched them closely. They were facing each other, beak to beak, and one affectionately raised its little head and gently placed it on the other’s neck. Darkness fell and Omar could no longer see the birds, but only the dim shapes of the silent trees. All at once a great rejoicing came from the poplar tree. A nightingale sang and sang as though his throat would burst for joy. Omar listened, but the sweet melody only depressed him more. A happy bird was singing to an unhappy boy.

Omar left the balcony, again rubbing his eyes with his hands.

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

“Are these the same eyes that I had yesteryear?
Then why did I not behold Laylí and see her beauty
while she was yet unveiled?”

He remembered now the summer day when the Imam bade Laylí bring sherbet to the three students in the garden. He had taken the cup from Laylí’s tray with scarcely a glance at the young cupbearer. Were Laylí to offer him a cup of sherbet now, he would leave it untasted to drink with his eyes the beauty of the cupbearer.

“Ah,” he thought, “if I were in a desert with but one cup of water, the desert would be Paradise if Laylí were the cupbearer! If I might call her, as the Imam did that day, my *sákí*.” The name was sweet to his ears and he repeated it. “Others call her Laylí, but to me she shall be Sákí.”

He quickly threw himself down on his cotton-stuffed mattress. But there was no sleep. The graceful figure of his Sákí moved before his closed eyes. Nizam and Hassan put out the lamp and were soon asleep, but the nightingale still sang, and Omar still tossed in his bed, until the weariness of mind and body at last brought rest.

Omar woke to the song of robins, gladly greeting the dawn of another day. It was Friday, and the boys had no studies. Omar had waked early as usual, but he had no desire to make ready for breakfast. Reluctantly he arose and dressed himself,

THE FIRE OF SPRING

emerging later even than the laggard Hassan. When breakfast was over, Nizam and Hassan resumed their chess battle, and Omar moodily paced the floor again, waiting till the hour when the Imam would summon his students to accompany him to the mosque. He stationed himself on the balcony where he had listened last night to the love song of the nightingale. It was silent now, but the garden was full of chirpings. Robins were running over the ground, stopping with quick jerks and listening with cocked heads to hear the stirring of worms beneath the earth.

The sun was rising high in the sky, topping the poplar trees and filling the air with golden warmth. A slender figure in a flowing *chadar* was walking under the rows of poplar trees by the rose-covered wall. Omar's heart leaped out for joy.

“It is Sákí, it is Sákí!” Yet how could he see her face to face and let her know his feeling? She might leave the garden without ever looking toward him. Nay, he would never leave the balcony, and he stood motionless, viewing his heart's desire, watching every step that she was taking. At last she moved toward the house.

“Will she not look up? In the name of Khoda, let her lift up her eyes toward me.”

Khoda heard his prayer, for before she made her entrance into the house she looked up toward the balcony and saw Omar gazing at her with all the

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

sadness that encompasses the despairing lover's face. Their eyes met, then Laylí quickly disappeared into the house. Yet some joy was left in the heart of the young tentmaker. He had seen his beloved. And had been seen by her.

Omar viewed the sun. "Perhaps coming out and walking under the rows of poplar trees is her habit. I shall watch at this time to-morrow."

The next day was Saturday, the first day of the week for the boys to begin their studies. There was a great conflict within Omar's soul. His lessons must be learned, but Sákí now held a more important part in his thoughts than mathematics or the holy word of the Koran. It was far sweeter to be thinking of Sákí than to crowd his brain with the words of the Prophet. He placed his Koran before him, but looked at it blankly. At last the sunbeams told him that it was about the time when he had seen Sákí yesterday, walking under the poplar trees. He closed his Koran and quickly proceeded from the room, leaving his fellow students in great surprise. Omar had never left his studies in such fashion.

"What is the trouble?" queried Nizam, but Omar had not time to answer.

He made his way at once to the balcony, but he was only in time to see the veiled figure of Sákí making her entrance into her father's house.

"I have lost my great opportunity for the day.

THE FIRE OF SPRING

Ah, if I had come sooner she would have seen me! The day is lost, the day is lost!" cried Omar. "She may never walk in the garden again."

Soberly the young tentmaker returned to his studies. The boys were concerned about Omar now, for they could not understand his sudden departure, and here he came back wearing the moody look that betokened black thoughts. But, before they could ask what was the matter, they heard the Imam coming.

"Hush," said Nizam, "the teacher is coming. Let us all be quiet."

The boys arranged themselves, even Hassan looking sober and serious. The great teacher moved to the center of the room and gravely seated himself. Nizam was the first to recite his lesson from the Koran and he did well.

"Now, Omar, let me hear what you have done with the lesson for to-day. This is one of the most important chapters in the Koran."

Omar looked down in confusion. This time he had not memorized even the first words of his lesson.

"Master, I do not know my lesson for to-day," he said humbly.

"What can this mean, what can this mean? Are you going to disappoint me after this long time?" cried the Imam, looking sharply at Omar. "This is the first time you have not learned your lesson perfectly. What is the trouble?"

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

“I am your sacrifice,” responded Omar, “but my thoughts have not been on my lesson. May Khoda help me to do better to-morrow.”

“I am glad to hear you say that,” said his teacher, and he turned to Hassan.

Hassan was now in his glory, for this time he would excel Omar in his recitation of the Koran, a thing he had never done before. When the morning lessons were over, the teacher left the room, but at the door he turned to Omar and gave him a searching look. The boys were quiet for a while. Hassan went on with his calligraphy, taking out his pens with an important air, for he had distinguished himself that morning by surpassing Omar. Nizam reopened his Koran with a wondering look at Omar. For Omar not to do as well as Hassan in the Koran was most puzzling to the soul of Nizam.

Omar was now ashamed and angry with himself. Why had he let himself be so overcome by his feeling for Sákí that he had no thoughts for his lessons? And what if the Imam found out that his student desired his daughter more than his teaching?

“Ah,” thought Omar, “the Koran is the book of wisdom, but Sákí is sweet!” And Sákí again took hold of his mind.

Next morning Omar stationed himself on the balcony long before he thought it was time for Sákí to make her appearance. “Will she walk in the gar-

THE FIRE OF SPRING

den this morning?" he thought to himself. "Did she not come yesterday and the day before yesterday? *Khob*, I shall stay here and watch." And he forgot his lessons. The one great desire of his life now was to behold his Sákí walking under the rows of poplar trees.

Omar watched a long time before he heard the creaking of the door and light steps sounding.

"At last, at last there she is!" Omar's heart leaped for joy. His eyes followed Sákí everywhere she went. Now she paused by a blooming rosebush. She touched the velvet petals with her pretty fingers, and stopped to breathe the fragrance. How fortunate were the roses, Omar thought, to feel Sákí's gentle touch. He watched her as she went from flower to flower. He saw her pluck a crimson rose.

With rose in hand she proceeded, walking along the row of poplar trees. Omar watched her every movement, never taking his eyes away from her. At last she came toward the house, taking small, graceful steps. She was nearly under the balcony. She looked up and saw Omar watching her. Their eyes again met. She smiled and dropped the rose, then hastened into the house.

Omar quickly descended into the garden and picked up the flower that only a moment ago had been held in Sákí's hand. He held it tenderly as though it were a divine gift from Khoda. He walked into the study room, covering the rose in the palm of

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

his hand, lest his fellow students see it. He was nearly bursting with joy such as he had never before experienced. Sákí had smiled and given him a rose. Sákí had spoken to him with her eyes and there was much hope in the young tentmaker's heart. He turned to his lessons with the confidence of the lover who has won the favor of his beloved. He opened his Koran and placed the flower within its pages.

"Khoda knows," he thought, "this rose is holy. It is the word of Khoda and not this book, for the book has no beauty that can compare with the loveliness of this flower."

There was but a short time until the Imam would come to hear his students recite, and Nizam and Hassan had been diligently studying all the while Omar was watching from the balcony. But Omar was not afraid of making another failure. He read the chapter quickly and every word wrote itself instantly on his mind. Never had his wonderful memory performed such a miracle. With one glance, it seemed, he had memorized the entire chapter.

"In the name of Khoda," he shouted, closing the Koran over Sákí's rose, "I could learn ten chapters this morning!" And he laughed for very joy.

Nizam and Hassan looked up, startled.

"You are becoming foolish," said Nizam gravely. "Yesterday you wore a black look and scarcely spoke to us. Now you are laughing at nothing. What has happened to you?"

THE FIRE OF SPRING

“Ah, maybe you will know some day,” said Omar with an air of superior knowledge.

At that instant, steps were heard in the corridor, and the Imam walked in.

“How are my students this morning?” And he gave an anxious look at Omar.

“We are all well,” said Nizam, who was the spokesman.

“*Khob, begin the Koran,*” said the teacher, without wasting any more words.

Nizam, always in earnest mood when he recited the Koran, repeated his lesson well. The great teacher knew that it was not necessary for Nizam to recite the whole chapter. It would be better to stop him in the middle to give more time to Omar.

“Now, Omar, you will proceed. In the name of Khoda, you will do better than you did yesterday.”

Omar lost no time in beginning. Looking neither right nor left, he went through his lesson like a well trained parrot. His perfect recitation, after the great failure of the day before, astonished the Imam.

“A change has come over you, Omar. What has happened?”

Omar blushed. It was the rose from Sákí that had worked the great change.

“Unusual boy,” thought the Imam to himself, as he walked out of the study room. “Why, by the will of Khoda, he may even surpass Nizam in knowing the Koran.”

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

When the shadows were lengthening and the birds in the treetops were beginning their evening song, the students were walking under the rows of poplar trees. Omar paused now and again to look at the rosebush from which Laylí had plucked the rose that morning.

A great barking of the dog heralded some one's approach. The gatekeeper was opening the gate and two veiled figures, followed by Hatim, walked into the courtyard. Omar's heart beat quickly. The slighter figure was Laylí, the other probably her mother.

“Look, look!” cried Nizam in surprise. “Why, it was Laylí! Is it possible that Laylí is already wearing the *chadar*? ”

“*Khob*, have you not heard the news?” spoke Hassan.

“What news?” inquired Omar.

“I was in my grandfather's house last Juma, and heard that Laylí is already betrothed.”

A spear went through the heart of the young tentmaker.

“To whom?” asked Nizam with interest.

“To Ali Akbar of Meshed.”

“And who is he?” cried Omar wildly.

“He is the great-grandson of the holy Imam Riza, may peace be on his soul,” answered Hassan importantly.

Omar spoke no more. All hope was taken from him. How could he, the son of a tentmaker, have

THE FIRE OF SPRING

ever hoped to win Laylí? For the first time in his life he despised the trade of his fathers. And what good was it to him that he had left the tentshop to become a student? A poor student could not ask for the Imam's daughter. The fame and wealth that his learning was to win in that glorious future of which the three boys sometimes talked would come too late.

That night a white moon ascended the sky. Nizam and Hassan were asleep, but Omar tossed from side to side, while wild thoughts raced through his mind.

“My Sákí will not be happy in Meshed. I alone can make her happy. Ah, Khoda, take away this Ali Akbar! Strike him dead.”

The brilliant moonbeams had formed a white circle on the floor, and they drew Omar to the balcony. In the garden below, every leaf and flower gleamed silver. Everything was quiet, not a breath could be heard. Even the love song of the nightingales had ceased in the branches. Omar descended into the garden, stepping softly so as not to rouse the great watchdog asleep by the courtyard gate. He lay down upon the soft grass beneath the willow tree, whose sweeping branches trailed in the pool. The gentle breeze cooled his hot forehead.

Even before he heard their sound, he felt the coming of light footsteps. Across the grass they fell so softly, yet at every step Omar's heart leaped. Sákí was coming. His heart was beating so wildly that it nearly suffocated him. His very joy was like

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

a heavy burden. The footsteps came nearer. He felt Sákí's presence, though he did not dare to open his eyes. He felt soft fingers on his forehead. . . .

The dreamer woke. The moon-bathed garden lay quiet and empty about him, and Omar's heart knew the last depth of his despair. Sákí, the tulip-cheeked Sákí, could be only a dream for him. Slowly, with dew-covered clothing, he rose and returned in the moonlight to the room where Nizam and Hassan still slept.



CHAPTER XIV

THE MOVING FINGER WRITES

IT was a day of great excitement in the household of Imam Mowaffak, for his daughter, Laylí, was to be given in marriage to Ali Akbar, a great-grandson of Imam Riza of Meshed, the greatest of the Persian saints. Kerba Hatim, the faithful steward, had risen early that morning to make preparation for the coming of the cavalcade from Meshed to take away Laylí. All morning there was a bustling about, and fine rugs were spread in the courtyard, where the chief members of the escort from Meshed would be received.

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

The Imam had risen early also, and was walking under the trees in his garden, viewing the flowers heavily laden with morning dew. He walked slowly, for he was growing old and feeble, but his heart was glad and he gave thanks to Khoda that he had lived long enough to see his youngest daughter given in marriage to the son of such a celebrated family.

“*Khob, Laylí* will be married into the family of Imam Riza, and that is something to be proud of. This is the day her bridegroom sends the escort. They should be here soon.”

To-day the courtyard gate stood wide open, and soon the Imam’s friends began arriving, among them all the dignitaries of the mosques. Hadji Mukhtar, the lord of Naishapur himself, came to help receive the party from Meshed.

Hatim, from the housetop, had seen, far away, a horseman with a spear on his shoulder dashing through the streets and making directly toward the Imam’s gate. Excitedly Hatim descended and announced the news to his master. The Imam himself went to the gate to welcome the emissary of the bridegroom.

“Khoda be praised, is this the house of Imam Mowaffak?” inquired the horseman, halting at the gate.

“In the name of Khoda, I am the Imam and this is my house.”

THE MOVING FINGER WRITES

“I bring you greetings from the Imam of Meshed, to whose son your daughter is betrothed. An escort of a hundred horsemen is following, to carry the bride to Meshed.”

“You have come on the pupil of my eye,” said the Imam. “Enter in the name of Khoda.” His two feeble hands came together, and instantly Hatim approached to take the horse.

Now the chosen friends of the Imam mounted and rode out to meet the bridegroom’s friends on the way and conduct them with ceremony into the city. With the sunlight flashing on their spears and javelins, the hundred horsemen from Meshed entered the city gate and proudly marched through the streets. All the people of Naishapur crowded to watch the procession, proud that such a magnificent escort had come to take their Imam’s daughter to her husband’s house. The horsemen were divided into small groups and went to be guests of prominent families. Hassan’s grandfather looked after the comfort of ten men. Being rich and powerful, he could have taken care of them all, but he was willing to share the honor of entertaining the visitors with other friends of the Imam.

From the balcony, Omar saw the cavalcade enter the courtyard. He had not slept that night. His mind was filled with bitter and rebellious thoughts. “It is fate, it is fate,” he had repeated to himself all night. “Ah, Khoda, if I had the power to change

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

the scheme of things, these horsemen would never approach the walls of Naishapur!"

He stood silently gazing, as through a mist, into the courtyard. He saw Nizam and Hassan walking among the guests and making themselves useful.

The Imam, though occupied with his guests, noted the absence of his favorite student, and approached Nizam with some concern to ask why Omar was not enjoying the festivities of the day.

"Omar is not well, Master. He said that he slept badly and he has eaten no food this morning."

"Go bring him down. If he is ill and can not come, send for Hakim Ismail."

Nizam entered the balcony where Omar stood gazing sadly upon the scene below.

"Omar, our teacher bids you come down, but if you are not well, Hakim Ismail will come to you."

"My head is weary," answered Omar, "and my star does not shine to-day, but I do not need the physician. What does the Imam want of me?"

"He wishes you to enjoy the entertainment and behold the important guests from Meshed. It is not good for you to stay here alone. Come down."

"What is, is," Omar said and silently walked with his friend, Nizam, into the courtyard. Proudly the Imam presented his favorite student to the Imam of Meshed. But Omar, who once would have coveted the honor of beholding the great man, bowed before him with bitterness in his heart. This was Ali

THE MOVING FINGER WRITES

Akbar's father, this was the man who had stolen Sákí from him, who was taking her away for his son.

Early the next morning, the horsemen gathered in the courtyard of the Imam, after having spent the night as guests in the homes of prominent Naishapurians. They kept coming until the whole courtyard was full of men.

Omar would not go down, for his heart was too heavy with sorrow. He stood gazing from the balcony upon the brilliant scene in the courtyard. Behind the guarded doors of the women's quarters, Laylí was being prepared for her journey. At last two white horses, ornamented with velvet trappings and shining golden tassels, and carrying a *takhtaran*, approached the entrance of the women's quarters. Omar's heart throbbed. His Sákí was coming for the last time into the courtyard. He saw her walk from her father's house, supported by her aunt, the Imam's sister, who was to accompany her to her new home and represent the Imam's family at the marriage.

Omar's gaze was fastened upon the slender veiled figure of Laylí. Her *chadar* covered her entirely, concealing the rich silk and velvet of her wedding robes. He could not even see her eyes, for all her face was veiled.

Kerba Hatim and another manservant helped

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

Laylí and her aunt into the *takhtaravan*, and now everything was ready. The horsemen were already mounted. The leader shouted, "Make way, make way for the queen!" And he led the cavalcade out of the courtyard. Laylí and her aunt, hidden in the *takhtaravan*, were in the middle of the procession, safely guarded.

Omar watched on the balcony until the last of the horsemen had disappeared. "Sákí is gone, Sákí is gone!" he cried. "My garden is empty." And he threw himself on his bed and wept in distraction until, exhausted in mind and body, he fell asleep.

Omar knew that all his tears and sleepless nights could not bring Laylí back. Very cleverly he kept his feelings from the Imam and Hassan, but Nizam had begun to suspect, and at last Omar confided to him his despair.

"May Khoda be kind to you," he said, "and never afflict you with such punishment."

Nizam gazed sadly at Omar. "My friend," he said, "no one can change the ways of Khoda and it is no use to brood over what you can not have. It is better to take up your studies again, lest the Imam discover the cause of your illness."

"I will do my best," said Omar. "What will be, will be." And he busied himself with his books and the science of the stars.

Weeks passed. Omar was yet unable to center all

THE MOVING FINGER WRITES

his attention on his studies, but his lessons were faithfully done, and the Imam was well pleased again with his progress.

At last winter came and Omar went no more upon the balcony. That made him feel a little better, for every morning he had stood there and looked down, imagining that he was seeing his Sákí among the trees and flowers. Now the roses were withered with the frost, and the trees stood bare and lonely against the cold sky. Snow fell heavily and chilling winds scraped together the boughs of the poplar trees. Naishapur had had a mild winter the year before, and now the cold seemed doubly severe. Day by day the Imam grew more feeble, and could no longer walk in the garden. There was no strength in his limbs, and his hands shook so that he could hardly hold his Koran.

Now he missed a day visiting his students.

“What can be the matter?” cried Nizam. “Our teacher did not come to-day.”

Just then Hatim appeared.

“The Imam is not well,” said Kerba Hatim. “He sends me to tell you that Nizam will hear you recite the Koran this day. Omar will help you in mathematics, and Hassan will inspect your handwriting.”

“May Khoda prolong our master’s life,” said Nizam.

“He is getting old and no one can tell what this

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

cold may do to him," responded Hassan. "Khob, if the Imam can not live long, what are we to do?"

"We have learned much from him," said Omar, "and we should be grateful for that."

"Another year, then another and another; that is all," he thought. "There is an end to life and what does it matter? Do not kings die? Did not Jamshid die like any other man?" Now, although it was his own teacher, the thought of death did not disturb Omar. To him, the loss of Sákí was greater than any loss that death could inflict.

Nizam heard the boys recite the chapter from the Koran, and Omar listened to their work in mathematics, and Hassan inspected their penmanship. They all agreed that they were doing well.

Next day the boys gathered at their regular time in the study room. Very faintly they heard steps.

"In Khoda's name, the Imam is coming," said Hassan.

"Then he is not so ill as Hatim made us to fear," said Omar thankfully.

The door opened and the Imam, supported by his ivory cane, made his entrance. The boys stood and paid him the respect due their teacher and an old man.

"My boys, sit down," he said. "You are the light of my eyes. If I die to-day I will feel that I have done my duty. Now, Nizam, read your lesson."

THE MOVING FINGER WRITES

Nizam repeated the chapter without mistake. Omar did well, and Hassan also. The Imam's hands were trembling and his voice was shaking, but as a true teacher he would die teaching, if he could.

"I can not stay here long this time. I am very weak," and he began coughing. "If Khoda could see His way to keep me alive until Nurooz, I could be with you for another year," he said.

"Nurooz is only a moon away," responded Omar, "and the spring will soon be here."

"Yes, beloved, but many things can happen within a moon."

The Imam lingered, seeming loath to leave his students this time. He bade them go on with their studies, and remained a little longer, watching the three heads bent over their work, and meditating upon the future of these chosen students, the future he had so earnestly planned for, but would not himself see.

"The mark of greatness is written in their faces," he thought, "but I am worrying about Hassan. The boy is clever and ambitious, but he lacks industry and piety. And cleverness and ambition without discipline of spirit can be dangerous. I have done my best for him, and his future is in Khoda's keeping."

The sober look in the deep eyes lightened as he next turned his gaze upon Nizam. "Nizam's future is clearly marked," he thought. "He has a mind

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

single to the law. The zeal with which he applies himself to the study of the Koran indicates that the boy will become a great judge and an able administrator. He will serve Iran well and be rewarded with honor."

The Imam's gaze rested longest upon Omar, penetrating the sensitive and restless mind that would always seek after truth and find it not, for no one but Khoda could know the truth.

"Omar is my favorite. I fear he will always be poor, for his spirit will always search after the unknown, giving little heed to riches and power. He will surpass me in the study of mathematics and astronomy. May Khoda bless him and advance him toward the complete life."

The Imam rose, leaning heavily upon his ivory cane. "Khoda keep you until to-morrow," he said and feebly walked out.

A chilly wind hovered over Naishapur that night, bringing with it cold rain and sleet. The Imam did not rise at his regular hour. The *hakim bashie* was called at once, but could not stop the coughing nor relieve the pains that were sapping little by little the meager strength of the Imam. The struggle was too much, and, at cockcrow in the middle of the night, the soul of the Imam, the great teacher, was loosed from its earthly prison.

In the morning the news spread throughout the

THE MOVING FINGER WRITES

city. *Azans* were given from the minarets of every mosque.

“Khoda is just, Khoda is just! Khoda has taken the soul of the Imam, may Khoda give him peace and rest. Khoda is just, Khoda is just!” the *azan* givers repeated again with melodious tones that brought tears from the devout Naishapurians.

A great crowd, with sad faces and heavy hearts, gathered in the courtyard of Imam Mowaffak. Four *mullahs* from the Juma Masjid came and took charge of the body of the Imam. They washed it with the precious tears which had been brought from Kerbela. In the afternoon, the funeral procession departed for Meshed, with the coffin of the Imam, on a ladder, shrouded with black velvet and carried by two black horses. The Imam was to be buried near the shrine of the holy Imam Riza.

Omar, Nizam and Hassan, and several members of the household, followed the coffin for some distance. Then the cavalcade stopped to have the sorrowing relatives and students take another look at their departed master, before they returned home.

“The tears from Kerbela could not save our teacher,” said Omar, as he walked sadly with his friends. “Khoda knows this was his day to go.”

Nizam said nothing, and Hassan was also grief-stricken so that he could not speak.

The boys gathered in the room where they had studied together for four years.

THE YOUNG TENTMAKER

“What now, what now?” spoke Nizam.

“Khoda only knows,” responded Omar.

“Who knows the ways of Khoda?” said Hassan solemnly. “But we know it has been said that whoever studied under the Imam was sure to become a great man. Maybe all of us will not become great, but one of us at least is likely to attain fame. Let us make a pledge that whoever becomes rich and powerful among us will share his wealth and honors with the other two.”

“I will never be great,” spoke Omar sadly. “I must go back to my tentmaking, for I have no money to pursue my studies and no means to win the favor of the powerful.”

“Who knows?” said Hassan.

“Hassan is right,” said Nizam. “Let us make the pledge for the sake of our friendship.” And in turn they solemnly took the vow.

The hour had come for the three students to depart for the last time from the house of the Imam. Nizam and Hassan were to return to their parents in distant cities. The boys gathered their belongings. Omar embraced his friends and said, “*Khoda fest* (God be with you).” And he descended into the courtyard. The great watchdog rose from his corner and trotted up to Omar, who gave him a farewell pat on his head and passed through the gate.

He walked slowly through the snow. Memories of

THE MOVING FINGER WRITES

the great teacher rose to his mind with every step along the familiar streets where the Imam had walked with his students. At the gate of the Juma Masjid, Omar paused, remembering his first meeting with the Imam. He lifted his head toward the great minaret. There was the *azan* giver, about to call the people to prayer. The sun was sinking behind the house-tops, and the blackbirds were perching in the branches of the *chinnar* and poplar trees for the night as Omar reached his father's gate.

“Omar, my son,” said Ibrahim, “I am glad you are at home.”

Amina’s heart was melting for joy to have her son with her again.

Next morning, with sad and grateful memories of his great teacher, Omar sat at the loom in his father’s tentshop.



TAMÁM

MANY moons waxed and waned and one day Omar heard that his old school friend Nizam had been made grand vizier of Persia. Omar was still poor, still making tents for a living and continuing his studies in obscurity. He appeared before the grand vizier, who did not need to be reminded of the boyhood pledge and gladly offered Omar a high position in the government. But Omar declined. He desired no power or great place, but wished only for a small income, that he might have a garden of his own and give his time to study and teaching.

TAMÁM

Meanwhile Hassan, who had not made a success of his worldly ambitions, lost no time in seeking the grand vizier and demanding a share in his good fortune. He was rewarded with the governorship of a province, but still was not satisfied, and his greed and thirst for power caused his own downfall. He attempted to seize the throne, and the grand vizier was one of the first victims of his plots. The rebellion failed, and Hassan came to a bitter and disgraceful end.

Thus both Nizam and Hassan perished in the prime of life. But Omar lived to a great age in his beloved city of Naishapur, winning renown as a teacher and enjoying the favor of the king. The king who showered favors upon Omar is only a name now, and Nizam and Hassan are gone and forgotten, but the fame of Omar Khayyám, the great scholar, teacher and poet, is even brighter after eight hundred years.

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